like two halves of one heart; my life in your shape
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like two halves of one heart; my life in your shape

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Summary

It's been years since Jayce has last seen Viktor, yet a chance accident that necessitates Viktor's intervention drives them together again. Jayce is now stuck in Viktor's laboratory with a body that's half metal and far too foreign for his liking, navigating his recovery alongside a Viktor who—despite the years between them—is not all that different from the man he used to love.

Chapter 1

Chapter Notes

> This fic is fully complete (and sits around 30k total), but is mostly unedited as of now. I'll be posting each chapter as I finish editing it, and hope to get one chapter posted every weekend or so. The rating is for language, minor descriptions of gore, and implied sexual content.
>
> Additionally, the premise for this fic is based upon a very old prompt I received around six years ago (and wrote a short oneshot for, which you can find here). I've always wanted to rewrite it/write a full fic for it, so that's what this is! I hope you enjoy it as much as I enjoyed writing it—this AU has been a huge labor of love for me.
>
> Edit 06/21: After some consideration, I've changed the rating of this fic to T. This was one of the first fics I wrote that even kind of entered M territory, and I chose to rate it as such just to be safe. I now feel that the rating is a bit conservative (and potentially misleading for readers?) and have thus decided to change it. If you take issue with this, please feel free to reach out and let me know. Additionally, please still see the above for cws. Thank you!
>
> Edit 3/22: All chapter images have been updated per bekko's request (+ in preparation for a small personal project we're both working on). Old images can still be found on twitter!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Jayce's joints ache.

It's the first thing he notices as soon as he wakes.

The second thing he notices is that his body feels hot: uncomfortably so. There's an intense heat that's running across his torso and down the length of his leg—a burning, flesh-on-metal sensation—and Jayce's right arm protests as he tries to push himself up and into a sitting position. After a moment of heated struggle, Jayce collapses back onto his side with a sharp cry of frustration, the pain in his shoulder borderline searing.

Deep breaths. His mind is still fuzzy from recent sleep, and Jayce tries again to push himself upright. Pain jolts up his arm once more, and Jayce curses hoarsely under his breath. Damn his useless body—*what the hell even happened?*

Jayce reaches across his torso to grasp at his burning shoulder, right hand scrambling to find the source of his pain. It's with growing dread that Jayce finds nothing more than cold, quiet metal in the place of where his shoulder used to be, and his fingers run along the plate to find where it connects to his upper body: attached, transplanted, *grafted.*

Jayce pulls away his hand with a hiss, horror coiling thick in his stomach. The place where the metal met skin hadn't been hot to the touch, and yet, Jayce's hand still stings from the contact.

More deep breaths. Jayce swallows his terror and runs his hand across the metal shoulder that lies

in place of his own, his fingers shaking as they trail a path down an equally metal arm. Jayce grasps madly at the wrist that lies at the end, and—when he tries to flex the fingers of his right hand—five metal digits jerk in reply. Pain again, and Jayce hisses, teeth clenched tight against the burning sensation that spikes up his side.

Jayce pulls in another couple breaths, these ones more labored than the ones before. Carefully, he runs his still-human hand tight against his right side: touching, grasping, *clawing*against the metal that he inevitably finds along his upper torso, his hip, his entire right leg. The sharply plated metal runs cold along his side, terrible and painful, and Jayce spits expletives as he catalogs each replaced body part in his mind.

His memory is still dark, his mind alight with sounds and images from the day—the night? *the week?*—before. He had been visiting the College of Techmaturgy—*Zaun territory*, his mind supplies—at the behest of his colleagues at the Academy. He had been working, conversing, researching, and then—*what?* His entire world had exploded into color before his eyes. Visions of green-grey smoke, fires and screams and red hot pain.

The sensory memories come rushing back, choppy and distorted as Jayce forces them to the forefront of his mind, and he grits his teeth, hand gripping at the sheets of his bed. The pain had been overwhelming, more overwhelming than whatever cursed tech ails his body now, and the memory of it leaves Jayce's body shaking even more than it already had been, before.

Well—whatever happened, Jayce thinks, vision swimming and mind racing as he does his best to turn his head and observe the room around him, *I'm no longer in the College now.* The bed he rests in is unfamiliar and unwelcoming, its sheets a rough, stark white, and though the tables in the room are lined with medical equipment, the walls surrounding him are composed of a dark grey steel that belies any pretense of a Piltovian hospital. There's a small window across from him and a door to his right, both made from the same grey steel, and the door looms large and heavy—a bit more intricately decorated than the rest of the space. Jayce stares at it, and can't help but wonder if it might be locked.

He needs to get out.

He needs to leave, needs to *wake up*. The dark walls of the room press in around him and Jayce tries again to push himself into a sitting position, pain burning down both his metal and human arms. There's no doubt in his mind where he is—the dark metal of the building screaming *Zaun, Zaun, Zaun*—and Jayce grits his teeth against the agonizing discomfort, pushing and straining as he tries to will his body into proper movement.

"Oh good," a voice suddenly says, dark and terrifying in its familiarity. The sound snaps Jayce from his thoughts, and he turns to stare at the now open doorway, against which a figure now stands. "You're finally awake."

Jayce feels his heart constrict, anger and disbelief warring for dominance in his chest. "You—" Jayce hisses, watching the fiery candlelight of the room cast long, dark shadows against Viktor's metal, emotionless face. "I should have known it would be *you*—"

Viktor blinks, the lights in his mask flickering briefly off, and he tilts his head towards Jayce as he walks to the other side of the room. "Indeed," he murmurs, "it is me."

"What did you do to my *body*—" Jayce spits, rage and despair bubbling up from his stomach just as hot as the pain that burns his flesh. He still feels delirious, yet Viktor's presence brings with it a sharp, sudden anger that feels, all at once, like clarity. Viktor has turned away from him, his hands interacting with the contents of a table that Jayce—from his vantage point on the bed—cannot even

hope to see, and Jayce bares his teeth at the other man's back, words caught in his throat.

"I saved your life," Viktor intones, his voice set at an annoyingly exasperated cadence, "and if I were you, I'd be grateful."

"How could I be grateful for this?" replies Jayce, hissing the words under his breath as he gestures to the metal plates that Viktor has seared across his flesh. "I never wanted to be one of your experiments, never wanted to be a part of your *glorious evolution*—what in the world made you think I would?"

Viktor pauses what he's doing, Jayce's words making his shoulders go taut. He turns his head, looking at Jayce through sharp, backlit eyes, and Jayce suppresses a sudden, cold shiver that runs down his spine. "You misunderstand," Viktor says tightly. "I know that, and you aren't."

"Then why is the entire right side of my body gone?" Jayce spits, furious as he cranes his neck in another vain attempt to sit up. Knowing that it was Viktor who did this to him—who changed, mutilated his body like one of his drugged up lackeys—makes the pain all the more difficult to bear, and Jayce grits his teeth as he continues to push himself upright.

"Stop straining yourself, or the pain will get worse," Viktor replies, looking down at Jayce from the other side of the room. "And I don't know exactly what happened—I just know that the College was attacked. I operated upon you afterward, but I can assure you: I wasn't the one to blow you up."

"Small points in your favor, then," Jayce spits, some perverse part of him angry that he can't blame that on Viktor, too. "But whether it was you or not, you still had no right to operate on me in the aftermath!"

"It wasn't like I could get your consent when you were already *half-dead*," Viktor replies with a sharp sigh. Jayce snarls back, another disagreement on his tongue, but he bites it down as Viktor turns away from him, bile rising in his throat at the dismissal. There's the sound of liquid being poured, and when Viktor eventually turns his attention back to Jayce, there's a small glass of water and a wet rag held tightly in his hands. He moves as if to walk to Jayce's bedside, metal soles echoing heavily against the metal floor, and Jayce immediately pulls back, both mentally and physically, from the approaching man.

"Don't touch me," he hisses, his sides burning as he tries to push himself up against the wall to his back, "don't you dare come *near* me."

There's a short moment when Viktor doesn't reply, his body stiff. "I'm not going to hurt you," he says, his voice curiously low.

"No more than you already have?" Jayce sneers, and Viktor makes a noise like he's sucking in a breath, gloved fingers tight around the glass in his hand. Jayce laughs, then, the sound rough against his dry throat, and Viktor stands there, watching him through darkened eyes, as Jayce hacks out a set of brittle coughs, less than a second later.

"It was not my intent to cause you pain, Jayce," Viktor says, short and sharp. "I had one goal, and one goal alone: to keep you *alive*."

"Well you sure fucking managed it, didn't you?" Jayce snaps back, the question laced with as much venom as he can muster. Viktor begins to reply, but Jayce cuts him off, voice sharp. "Though—I might as well be dead. After all, I can't imagine the afterlife would be any worse than *this*."

Viktor snarls then, the noise sharp and angry as it releases from the divots along his metal face. “Fine, Defender—” he growls, spinning his heel and stalking back to the countertop behind him. “If an argument is what you want, then that’s what you’ll get.”

Jayce barks out another laugh, sides burning as he continues to force his body up against the wall. “Fucking *try me*.”

Viktor breathes out, slamming the glass of water back atop the counter hard enough that Jayce hears the ceramic crack. “Those halfwitted scholars at the Academy might be willing to put up with your pompous attitude, Jayce,” Viktor snaps, “but I *saved your life* yesterday, and if there’s something wrong with that, then that’s news to me.”

“Valoran be damned,” Jayce hisses back, “there’s something wrong with this entire *situation!* I’d held out hope that you’d learn something about fucking consent within the past few years, but here you go again—modifying my body when you had absolutely no right to.”

“I did nothing more than provide you with an adequately functioning arm, leg, and *lung*,” Viktor snaps back, “because, in case you don’t recall, you were already *half dead.*”

Jayce breathes out heavily as he finally gets himself propped up against the wall behind him. His right side still burns, but he pushes the pain to the back of his mind, focusing instead on the roiling anger that sits within his gut.

“And how am I supposed to know that’s all you did?” Jayce demands, once he gets his breath back. Viktor laughs—the first real laugh that Jayce has heard from him in years—and the sound sends chills down Jayce’s spine.

“That’s the only reasonable question you’ve me asked thus far,” Viktor snipes, “and I’m beginning to regret *not* making additional modifications, because it seems your brain could have used it.”

“You’re such a bastard,” Jayce says, voice cracking as he does so. “After everything you knew of me, what the *fuck* made you think I would want this?”

“What would make me think you’d want to live?” Viktor counters, voice low and incredulous. “Is that even a question? I’m not a doctor, and I couldn’t have gotten you to a competent enough surgeon in time—I knew you wouldn’t like this, wouldn’t appreciate it, but by the gods, Jayce, what else do you expect me to have done?”

“You could have let me die.”

Jayce spits the words—sharp and painful as they roll off his tongue—and Viktor stops cold in his defense, bright eyes blinking once. There’s sweat dripping from Jayce’s forehead, and his single, yet-human hand shakes as it clutches at the white sheets of his cot. He knows he’s being unreasonable, knows he’s an absolute wreck in the state that he’s in; and yet, there’s a tight, disbelieving fury that trembles in his heart, and he knows there’s nothing Viktor will be able to say to make it go away.

“I see,” Viktor replies, after a quiet moment filled only by Jayce’s ragged breathing. His voice is measured—dark and vicious—and as he approaches Jayce’s bed, Jayce flinches away from him, his heart beating fast.

There’s a moment when Jayce thinks that Viktor might really kill him, his body still and silent and radiating with fury, but then something clicks, and Viktor’s third arm drops, slow and careful, and he places the leaking glass of water—the one he’d been trying to bring to Jayce, before—upon the

small side table at Jayce's right.

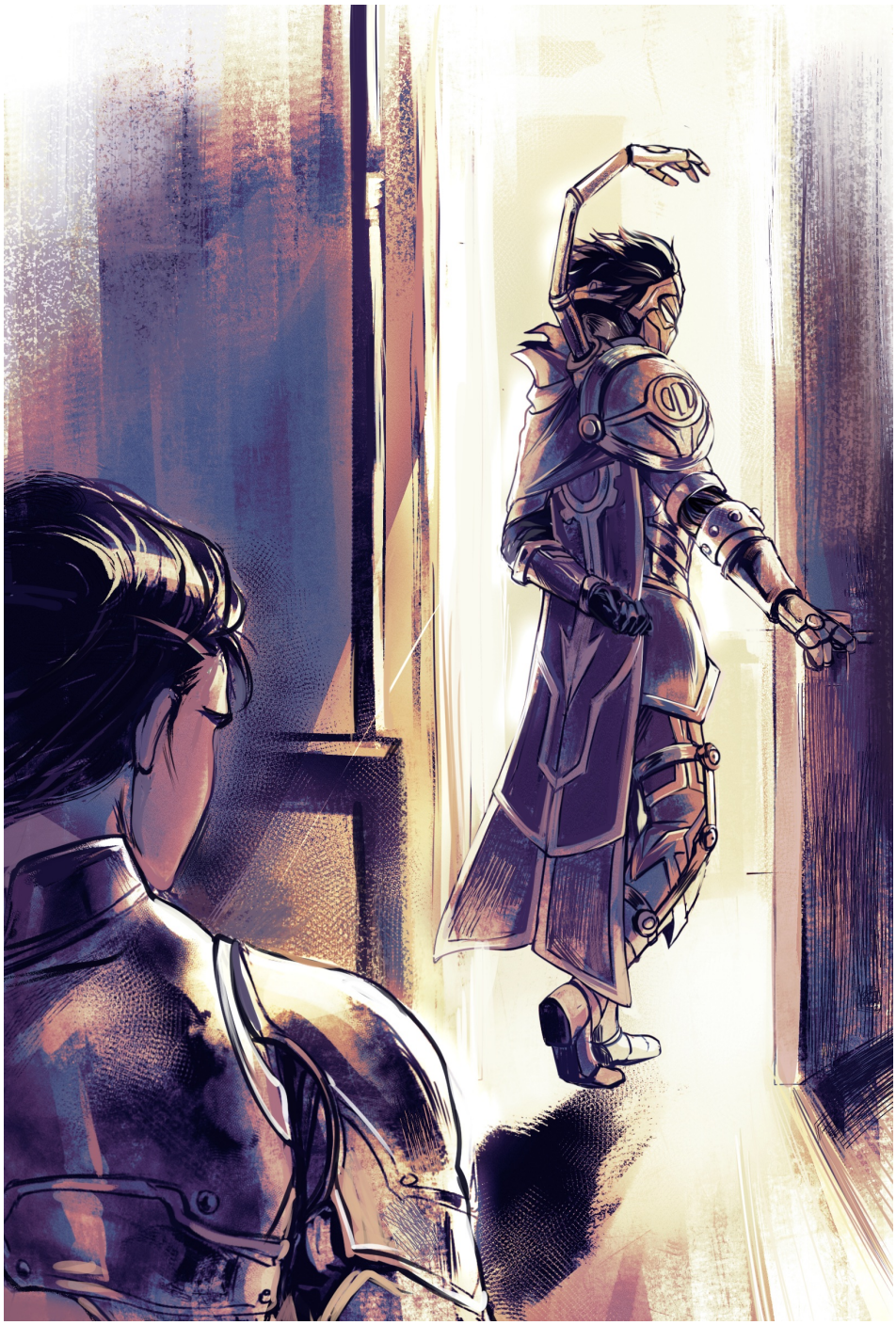
"Well then, Defender," Viktor finally murmurs, staring down at him as he steps back, "I'm truly sorry that I didn't."

His voice is low and quiet, vicious in its sincerity, and Jayce stares down at the cracked glass of water as Viktor begins to turn away.

"Be sure to rotate your joints before you sleep," Viktor says as he reaches the door's threshold. There's little to no intonation in his speech anymore—not at all like there was before—and Jayce finds the silent roboticism of it almost more unnerving than the fury.

"Small circles," Viktor continues, staring back at him, "flex your muscles, and no quick motions. Do it all again the next time that you wake, and your pain will have eased up, by then."

Before Jayce can think of a smart remark to make in reply, Viktor has already swept himself from the room, his thin, dark red cloak billowing out behind him.



Jayce breathes raggedly into the empty room and grits his teeth, adrenaline still pumping through his veins.

He hacks out another cough a moment later—the world around him feeling dizzy, unreal—and Jayce stares at the door that Viktor just exited out of for one quiet, solid minute. He breathes in and out, then in and out again: working his lungs—*real lung and imposter lung*—with each breath that he takes. The air in the room is fresh, unlike most of the air in Zaun, and Jayce wonders, his thoughts snide, just how much it must cost to keep the air quality in Viktor's lab this decent.

As Jayce's adrenaline levels slowly continue to drop, the pain in his side begins to return full force, and Jayce curls back down in his cot—eyes shutting tight against the reality that stretches before him. His entire right side is mechanical now—that much is certain. From his right foot to his upper right shoulder, Jayce's body has been fused with dark, empty steel. And to top it all off, Viktor—the insane, immoral, bastard of a man, *Viktor*—had been the one to orchestrate it all.

It's been years since he last saw Viktor, yet the weight of his betrayal back in Viktor's old laboratory looms large in Jayce's mind. Years of having studied together, having worked together, having *lived together* had made the betrayal even worse than it might have been, and for weeks, Jayce had been left in a state of denial. After all, the Viktor he'd fought that day had—in so many ways—been different from the Viktor of his youth. They'd both had their differences, surely, as all individuals do, yet their relationship had been one of mutual respect, understanding, and *ingenuity*, and the change that Jayce had seen in the other man back at his laboratory that day had been unthinkable. Incomprehensible. Terrifying.

That small bit of denial had stayed with Jayce over the past few years, and he'd held out hope that Viktor would one day come to understand the immorality of his actions and return to Piltover stronger for it. Jayce had always hoped that Viktor was capable of reforming, and that hope had stuck with him—small yet simmering—for years after the fact.

Jayce thinks of that hope now, and desperately wants to laugh.

If there had been any chance for redemption, any chance that Viktor could have mended the rift that he'd made between them—then that chance had surely vanished.

Humans are fickle creatures: individuals that think and act of their own free will. To stifle that individuality, to remove the blessing of choice—even at the behest of progress—is to condemn humans for what makes them *human*. Viktor had always understood that, yet, for whatever reason, he had still felt as though human emotion was a shackle towards true progress.

What is innovation without empathy?

Jayce repeats the question in his mind, and shuts his eyes tighter against the pounding in his heart.

Jayce had always felt that Viktor was the more empathetic of the two of them, yet his blatant disregard for human feelings in the face of human existence had always felt baffling. How could a man who cares so much for human life so fully want to cut out the aspects that make that life *good?* Jayce grinds his teeth, jaw stiff as he tries to relieve the incessant pounding in his head.

There's no way that Viktor could have asked Jayce what he'd wanted while he was passed out, delirious—*half-dead,* he'd said; and yet, to not understand or sympathize with Jayce's want for choice, with Jayce's anger at lack of choice? It's disgusting, inhuman.

Jayce pauses, mind reeling. *Is Viktor even human, still?*

He isn’t sure if he wants to know the answer to that.

All that Jayce can be certain of is that he is here, in Viktor’s laboratory in Zaun, with a half prosthetic body that won’t move the way he wants it to, and a simmering anger at a decision he wasn’t given—a betrayal that feels just as painful as the first.

Fuck, Jayce thinks. *What a fucking mess.*

He curls up further in the stark white cot, his body still shaking. He pulls the sheets tighter over his body, and—as pain continues to burn its way down his side—Jayce tries for once to stifle the spiraling thoughts that his mind continues to provide. Perhaps, he thinks facetiously, this is all just a dream, and tomorrow he’ll be back in his lab in Piltover: all thoughts of Viktor buried with the reality in which his body is no longer whole.

Jayce lies there—fully trembling, doing his best to shut off his mind from a reality that threatens to overwhelm him—and slowly, almost quietly, he wills himself to sleep.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks for reading, and much love to @bekkomi for the lovely art (and for supporting me through the making of this fic).

As always, you can find me @alainey_lee on twitter if you ever want to chat!

Chapter 2

Pain wracks Jayce's body all through the night. Heat pulses where his limbs used to be, the sensation curious and terrifying all at once. He drifts in and out of consciousness, a soft delirium weighing upon his body, and visions of Viktor—speaking to him, staring at him, sitting with him—plague his feverish mind.

Jayce doesn't properly wake up until some time later. His body still hurts, mouth dry and throat sore, yet Jayce does his best to ignore it as he blinks away the sleep, pushing himself into as best a sitting position as he can manage.

Jayce grimaces, and looks around.

He's alone in the same room that he was in before—same cot, same sheets, surrounded by the same dark grey Zaunite walls—and Jayce clicks his tongue, wondering why he'd been expecting anything different.

The countertops that surround the room are devoid of the heavy medical equipment that decorated them the last time Jayce awoke, and the window against the left wall is letting in steady, muted green light. Jayce can't tell from the bed what time of day it is, and he breathes out a rough, tired sigh, letting his head fall carefully sideways.

His eyes settle upon the side table next to him—the same side table that Viktor had left water upon, the night before. There's a new glass of water there now, as well as a small plate of dried food: nuts, fruit, and some sort of jerky. *High in salt,* Jayce thinks, *high in protein.* The same sort of food he'd bring to his workshop, back when he had large overnight projects to complete for Clan Giopara.

How long, Jayce wonders suddenly, *has it been since the last time he ate?*

How long has it been since the last time he *drank water?*

Stomach churning, Jayce realizes he probably hasn't hydrated since sometime during his stay at the College of Techmaturgy, and—gods—he can't even remember when *that* was.

Jayce takes a deep breath, mouth dry, and feels hunger gnaw angrily at his side.

Worst case scenario: the water is poisoned or drugged, and Jayce will simply die faster than he would have without it. *Worst case, or best case?* whispers a dark, terrible place in Jayce's mind, and Jayce grimaces, before carefully picking up the glass.

The water is lukewarm—left out for who knows how long—but Jayce wonders if he hasn't tasted anything better in his entire goddamn life. The water drips down the side of his mouth, spilling down his face as he drinks as much as he can, and the dried foods evoke a similar response, though the sharp motion of his jaw feels strange and unnatural as he eats for the first time in days.

For better or for worse, the food and drink help, and Jayce settles back against the wall, eyes closed as his stomach settles. He does his best to minimize movement in his right side, and as he continues to breathe out into the empty lab room, Jayce tries to organize his thoughts.

He'd been near hysterical the other night before he'd fallen asleep. *For good reason*, he reminds himself, but quickly pushes down any residual anger in favor of keeping a clear head. He remains resolute in his belief that Viktor had overstepped his bounds in their last conversation, yet he

recognizes that the man did, in fact, save his life, and perhaps he's just a little bit grateful. Jayce grimaces at the thought, but he knows that he doesn't truly wish to have died in the attack at the College, and Viktor surely understands that.

That said, however: he knows he has a right to be upset about the current turn of events, and—given their history together—Jayce thinks that his outburst the other night was not only justified, but also completely expected.

Viktor could have acted at least a little sympathetic, couldn't he?

Jayce sighs.

Another impossible question. Who knows what Viktor can and can't feel?

Anger, Jayce reminds himself, *he's certainly displayed anger.* But anything further than that: happiness, sadness, sympathy, empathy, regret?

Jayce really doesn't know.

He finishes the rest of his water in a final few gulps, stomach feeling better as he does so. Jayce leans back against the wall, and closes his eyes as he lets his memory continue to de-fog.

Jayce knows that he's grateful for having been saved, even if it wasn't done in the way that he might have wished it had. Viktor had saved his life, however terribly he'd done it, and Jayce recognizes that. However, that's where his appreciation stops.

For Viktor had been nothing but selfish, callous, and cruel after their falling out back in Piltover, his demeanor a complete 180 from the individual that Jayce had grown used to working alongside, and this new Viktor—this one that Jayce had caught a glimpse of the night before, the one that saved Jayce's life—doesn't seem to be that much better.

He's not the Viktor who tried to kill Jayce in cold blood those many years ago, no, yet he's still different: different from the Viktor that Jayce had lived with, had studied with, had wanted *back.* It's a depressing thought, wanting such an old, specific version of Viktor to return—especially when Jayce knows that what's done is done. What's happened between them before is in the past, and the consequences of the choices that the two of them have made can no longer be undone.

Yet still, Jayce wants. He wants for the Viktor of their youths to be the Viktor of his present; he wants to return to those quiet days of camaraderie and peace and quiet grins in the workshop at the tender moments before dawn. He wants for Viktor to have not had to modify his body, he wants for his right side to be fleshy and whole.

He wants, he wants, he wants.

But there's no way for him to go back now—no way to rip this new lung from his body, not without actually sentencing himself to the death that Viktor aimed to prevent—and Jayce feels his fingers twitch as he thinks about it, the reality of his situation continuing to settle in. These augmentations are a part of him now, and that's something that he'll have to accept, no matter how much he hates it.

He's startled from his restless thoughts as the door to his right opens up, and Jayce turns to watch Viktor walk in, a new plate of dried foods in one hand, and a glass of water held carefully in his third. Jayce struggles to push himself up into a better sitting position—the process easier than the previous time, though not by much—and Viktor greets him stoically as he sets down the new plate and the new glass of water, clearing out the empty ones that Jayce had left.

Jayce finally gets himself into an adequately propped up position against the wall to his back, and he grits his teeth against the pain that it took to get himself there. He ignores the ache as best as he can as he stares up at Viktor—just like he'd done the night before.

"You ate," Viktor notes, nodding once Jayce has finally settled himself. "That's good. How are you feeling?"

"Terrible," Jayce replies, short and guarded, and Viktor blinks down at him for a couple seconds longer, a soft sigh escaping from the divots on his mask. Then he turns away, making his way to the other side of the room, and Jayce watches as Viktor moves to drag a chair—that small, wooden one that'd been sitting in front of the room's main work table—back over, up close to Jayce's cot.

"What're you doing—" Jayce starts, his eyes narrowing as Viktor sits down. There are several sharp words sitting at the tip of Jayce's tongue, but Viktor makes a small clicking noise before Jayce can say anything more, his hands placed carefully in his lap, and Jayce stops short.

"I apologize," Viktor begins, stiffly, staring directly into Jayce's eyes, "for directing my impatience

towards you the last time you awoke."

Jayce frowns. He still feels on edge—yet now for a completely different reason. As his mouth works to try and come up with some sort of reply, Viktor continues, his voice subdued: monotone, dark, and robotic.

"I know you don't trust me anymore, and I don't expect you to. I shouldn't have engaged in an argument with you, knowing you were in a weakened mental state, and I apologize for letting my anger get the best of me.

"You are here for one reason and one alone: because saving you was the morally correct thing for me to do. Thus, I saved your life in the only way I knew how, despite knowing you wouldn't like it," Viktor says, voice slowing as he takes a quiet breath.

He's gazing back at Jayce, bright back-lit eyes pulled into slits, and Jayce—his body on fire, yet his stomach like ice—thins his lips, heart beating fast as Viktor speaks. "I apologize for the pain that I have caused you, Defender, but I do not regret saving your life, and I will not apologize for that."

The room is silent as Viktor finishes his statement, hands still held stiff in his lap. Jayce watches him, noting the poised and perfect posture, the evenness of Viktor's breathing, and feels as though Viktor has flipped another sort of emotional switch: this Viktor—different from the one that Jayce had met years ago in Viktor's lab, different from the one that Jayce had woken up to and argued with the previous night—is perfect and stoic and completely devoid of feeling.

Completely devoid of feeling, Jayce thinks, facetiously, *despite the fact that he's trying to make an apology.*

Is this Viktor's ideal? Is this the sort of person that Viktor strives to become: the sort of individual that gives apologies lacking in human emotion, and bends logic to suit his own twisted sense of morality?

In some ways, this apology feels more insulting than anything Viktor had snapped at him about the night before, and Jayce grits his teeth, suddenly very, inexplicably angry.

This time, he doesn't push it down.

"I find it ironic," Jayce replies slowly, heat bubbling up his throat, "that you bring up morality once again."

Viktor gazes back at him, still and silent, and Jayce pushes himself further up the wall, left hand pressing hard against the sheets of his cot as he braces himself backward.

"You strive to follow your morals to the letter," Jayce says, staring Viktor down, "yet you fail to accept when the morals of those around you differ from your own."

Viktor makes a noise, about to reply, but Jayce cuts him off before he can do so, his voice sharp. "You strive to reach this idealistic version of yourself that is devoid of everything that makes you an individual—everything that makes you unique. Doesn't that bother you?"

"No," Viktor replies immediately, tone flat. "Because uniqueness is not what I strive for."

Jayce laughs. "And yet, your morals have proven to be so *incredibly* unique that no one else in Piltover shares them—"

“An irrelevant distinction,” Viktor replies, voice hard, “considering the fact that the people of the Academy are immoral at heart. Their morals do not align with my own, solely because they care not for human life; not in the way that I do.”

“Do you really believe that that’s true?” Jayce asks, incredulous, and Viktor’s reply is again immediate—sharp and creeping up towards the one emotional response that Jayce feels confident in his ability to evoke: anger.

“*Yes*,” Viktor says, his voice growing heated despite his obvious attempts at control. “They may care for your people of Piltover, but they continue to do nothing for the people of Zaun.”

Jayce opens his mouth to rebut, but Viktor stands suddenly, his hands gripped tightly into fists at his sides. “Forget it,” he says, flat and hollow. “We’re done here.”

And Jayce makes a noise at the back of his throat—something between anger and disbelief.

“No,” he grounds out, a sharp vindication coursing through his veins, “we’re not. You don’t get to run away every time you get upset—every time you get mad that I’ve broken through to your emotional *core*. You might like to pretend that you’ve evolved into something more than human, might strive to remove yourself from your emotions, but I know that right here—right now—you still know how to feel. And I won’t let you run away from me, just because of that.”

Viktor flinches, a small, near unnoticeable motion, and Jayce lets satisfaction roll off of him in waves. It’s obvious that he’s right. Viktor does have an emotional switch, and it’s one that hasn’t been permanently locked in the “off” position, no matter how much he might want it to be.

Viktor has messed with his brain, that much is certain, yet, if their argument the other night—in addition to Viktor’s behavior now—is any indication, then Viktor still gets angry, Viktor still has faith in his beliefs, and perhaps, if Jayce pushes hard enough, Viktor can still change those beliefs, too.

Jayce sits back, glaring at the man that he’s argued with a hundred times before, and wonders if it isn’t still worth it for him to try.

“I’m not running away from anything,” Viktor replies—angrily, stiffly. “Though even if I wanted to, I don’t believe it would be very hard.” He gestures at Jayce’s bedridden state as he moves to stand next to the cot, towering above Jayce and the stark white sheets, and Jayce sneers back, continuing to glare up at him as viciously as he can.

“But you’re right,” Viktor grits out, “I do still feel emotion, no matter how much I wish I didn’t. I don’t understand how you always manage to press me just enough to make me tick, Defender—but you do. And if another argument is what you want, if that’s what would make you feel better, in this miserable state that you’re in—then fine. You win.”

Viktor’s eyes narrow into slits, and his hands curl into even tighter fists. “Listen well.”

Jayce opens his mouth to reply, but Viktor cuts him off, voice hard.

“You may think you understand me, but you don’t. You never have, and you never will,” Viktor snaps, “not as a person who was happily born and raised in Piltover, not as the type of person who would rather let his workers die than allow them to chemically overcome their fears. You have never tried to understand things from my point of view, and I’m doubtful you ever will.”

Jayce grits his teeth, listening to the lingering threads of an argument that is more than familiar to him.

“We’ve been over the workers before—” Jayce snaps, cutting in as best he can, and Viktor goes blessedly silent, backlit eyes narrowing further. “Any mind alteration that would allow one individual to control any aspect of another person’s self is a violation of their basic human rights, not to mention immoral at its core—”

“And yet, it would have been *temporary*,” Viktor cuts in, the words just as angry now as they were when Jayce last heard them. “And it would never have been without their consent; is such a minor and controlled concession not worth saving another person’s life?”

Jayce bites back his immediate snarl of “no,” grinding his teeth together and swallowing his words as Viktor clicks out a noise again, his eyes flashing dark.

Despite Jayce’s heady anger in the face of Viktor’s words, Jayce still feels a sharp spike of satisfaction—hotter than the pain that spikes across his body—flow through his veins.

This is the Viktor that he remembers. This is the Viktor that Jayce, however foolishly, still wants to take back. And so Jayce swallows his words, and watches as Viktor begins to pace.

“The people of Piltover don’t care for the people of Zaun,” Viktor spits, “and they never have. The fact that upholding your lofty ideals of free will and an unaltered state of mind take precedence over the saving of an individual’s *life* has proven that much to me.”

Viktor’s eyes narrow as he picks up the chair that he’d been sitting on and slams it back onto the ground, directly in front of its table. His hands hold tight against the back of the chair’s frame, vice-like grip cracking the wood as he does so, and Jayce’s satisfaction turns once again cold, his stomach turning. Viktor’s words—and his immediate show of force afterward—cause more terror than they likely should, and he pushes down his fear, alongside any inkling of guilt that Viktor’s words might have caused, as Viktor continues to speak.

“No one at the Academy ever understood what it meant to serve the people of our *twin* cities,” Viktor continues, the words hissing out as he glares back at Jayce’s prone body. “None of your lofty Piltover inventors ever cared about the people of Zaun as much as they cared for their own individual successes as engineers; never looked past their own damn noses to see the people beneath them starving, suffering, *dying*—”

“That has never been your problem to fix—” Jayce cuts in, but Viktor cuts him right back off, voice low.

“That includes you too, Jayce; when have you ever cared? If it isn’t my problem to fix, then whose is it? Yours?” Viktor is trembling from his place at the work table, hands still clutching the back of the chair. “Who will address the issues that plague the streets down here in Zaun? Who? The Chem Barons? *They like it this way.* The Piltover Council? *Hah.* Who would this work fall to, other than to me?”

“I don’t *know,* ” Jayce replies, exasperation coloring his anger, “but you can’t fix all the problems of the world on your own; you’re one man—one *human man* —and there’s no way you’ll be able to carry the weight of Zaun upon your shoulders, let alone more than that.”

Viktor scoffs, stalking back towards Jayce’s bed. His voice is bitter, sad and angry as he says, “well, I’m certainly going to try.”

“*Gods*,” Jayce replies, barking out a laugh, “you’ve always been an asshole, Viktor, but you’ve never been stupid—that sort of scope isn’t possible, and you absolutely know it.”

“Regardless,” Viktor repeats, throwing up his hands and pacing back, again, towards the worktable and the splintered chair. “At least I’m *trying*. That’s more than anything anyone else in the Academy has ever done—more obsessed with innovation itself than with the people your innovations are supposed to be *helping* —”

“It’s not like we ignore the realities of life,” Jayce snaps, taking a deep, steadying breath.

“No, you simply refuse to address them,” Viktor continues, “despite having both the resources and the capabilities to do so.”

Jayce grinds his teeth. Cornered, it feels, again. “Resources or not, Viktor, the solutions that you’ve proposed in the past remain just as immoral as they were before. They infringe upon the rights that all citizens, even those of Zaun, are allowed to retain, and the fact that you still press forward with them is inhumane and unethical,” Jayce insists, and Viktor paces back towards the cot, his footsteps heavy.

“Then *do* something about it,” Viktor says, as he stops in front of Jayce’s bedside. His voice is tinged with something that feels almost like distress, strained and tenuous as it is. “You, one of your peers, any of you lot at the Academy: find a solution that fits your own sense of morality, and do something more than complain about *my* methods and *my* morals and the help that *I’m* trying to provide.”

Jayce looks up at him, mouth working slowly, and finds that he finally doesn’t know what to say. Has he done anything for the people of Zaun? Nothing more than what he’d been assigned to do in the past, nothing more than what Viktor—during their time in the Academy—had asked Jayce to help him with. He simply hadn’t cared enough to do so.

He frowns, hands clenching around the sheets of the bed, until he finally, quietly, heaves out a sigh: all of the fight drained out of him as he realizes that this time—and not for the first time—Viktor has won.

The thought is bitter, but not unsurprising, and Jayce has to admit that many of Viktor’s points make sense, despite Jayce’s unwillingness to accept them. Viktor has likely spent years thinking about this—years stewing only in his own, angry thoughts—and Jayce hates the fact that, in some ways, he might be right. Piltover Academy has always been more focused on their push for worldly innovation than on the state of Zaun, and Jayce no longer knows how justified he is in defending that.

Jayce knows that although he had been the one to start this argument, out of anger and defensiveness and a need to prove Viktor’s apology wrong, Viktor has still managed to steer the entire conversation back to him, back to the Academy, and back to their age-old arguments on Piltover’s need to assist Zaun. And despite everything, if Jayce is being completely honest, he can’t help but be a little bit impressed.

Jayce thinks for a moment, his mind tired, before finally looking back up at Viktor and voicing the only thought that still remains simmering at the forefront of his mind.

“You tried to kill me Viktor, the last time that we met,” he says, and Viktor makes a quiet, affirmative noise—the sound low, distorted, and heavy. “Do you remember that? Because I certainly do, and so I’m sorry, Viktor—if I find it hard to believe you when you say that you still value human life above all else.”

Viktor stands tall in front of him—all of the anger slowly draining from his posture, his breathing, his body—and he stares down at Jayce, his voice dry and heavy once more as he takes time to

gather his words.

“I recognize that my morals—and my obsession with fixing, *improving* upon this world—have become more radical over time,” Viktor begins, slow as he speaks. “And yet, that doesn’t change the fact that my moral compass remains strong: stronger and clearer, now, than it ever has been, before.

“I believe in the work that I do, and I believe that the people of Zaun deserve more than what Piltover is willing to provide. I believe that a purging of emotions gives way to necessary clarity, and I believe that the future I work towards is one that is better, not just for the people of Zaun, but for the people of Piltover, too. I also believe that you have never fully understood me and that you are unable, or perhaps, unwilling, to reach a point where you ever do.

“I believed that fact when you stormed my laboratory the last time we met, just as I believe it now. That fact is why I tried to kill you—those many years ago, when you attempted to prevent me from saving hundreds of Zaunite lives—and that fact is why I do not resent you now—despite the fact that you did, ultimately, prevent me from doing so. I know that you simply do not understand my point of view, and that you likely never will—no matter how much I might wish you would.”

Viktor breathes in, slow and quiet, and Jayce bites his tongue, feeling almost like he’s holding his breath.

“I meant what I said before,” Viktor finally says, his posture loose and tired as he does so. “I’m sorry, Jayce, for not controlling my anger the last time we spoke. And I’ll apologize, too, for trying to kill you back in my laboratory that day. But I’m not sorry for valuing your life over a breach in consent that I could not have possibly acquired at the time in which it was necessary, and I do not regret saving your life.”

Jayce blinks, his mouth pulled tight and his head suddenly too full, and when he neglects to respond, Viktor turns away, heading for the door once more.

“I know you likely have more you want to say,” Viktor says, the words quiet as he leaves, “but I want you to think on my words before you say them. I am not running away from this, and I hope that you won’t, either. I'll be back soon, Defender, with your dinner, and I hope that you will think upon my words until then.”

Jayce blinks again, and then, all at once, Viktor is gone. His heart heavy, Jayce sits back—left alone once more in his sterile, Zaunite lab room, with a glass of water, another plate of dried foods, and too many thoughts warring for dominance in his head—and Jayce sighs, letting himself think.

Jayce runs through their conversations, both their first argument and their second one, over and over through his mind. Viktor’s *“think on my words, before you say yours”* haunts him each time he closes his eyes, and Jayce grits his teeth, anger bubbling up again, yet only for selfish, immature reasons.

Jayce doesn’t know what he’d been expecting from Viktor when the man had walked through the door, just an hour or so earlier, but an apology—and whatever else their conversation was—certainly hadn’t been it. He’d expected, perhaps, cold disregard: to be thrown out, after having been given enough food and money to make the trek back to Piltover. Or, perhaps, he’d expected continued anger: another contest of wills that would cause Viktor to storm out, just as angrily as he’d done the night before.

Perhaps more realistically, Jayce might have expected Viktor to simply ignore him: to leave him alone to fend for himself, only after verifying that he was alive enough to do so.

But instead of anything like that, Jayce had received an apology. A stilted and rehearsed one, sure, but an apology that Viktor believed in, nonetheless.

Jayce can fully admit that Viktor has changed, but he realizes now that they're not in the ways that he'd originally settled upon. Viktor's beliefs have solidified—radicalized, as he'd put it—yet remain, at their core, the same as they once were. He's worked to remove, or otherwise inhibit, his ability to feel regular emotions in some augment-related capacity, but not so much so that he doesn't still feel things—and strongly, at that. He's more emotional than the Viktor he'd met in Viktor's lab before, if less sharp around the edges, yet still more subdued than the man Jayce remembers from the Academy, and trying to keep all these versions of Viktor straight in his head feels absolutely maddening.

Yet, as Jayce continues to think, the one thing that he keeps looping back to is the fact that Viktor had apologized to him: apologized for causing him pain, apologized for getting angry, and apologized for trying to kill him those many years ago. It shows some level of empathy that Jayce hasn't originally expected him to exhibit, and—considering Viktor had even made an attempt to explain things from his point of view, rude and assuming as it ended up being—Jayce can tell that he's trying. In his own reluctantly roundabout way.

Given their argument on his first night here, Jayce thinks that trying is, at the very least, a step in the right direction. It's certainly more than he, himself, has managed to do thus far. And in the end, all he has to do now is figure out whether or not he's willing to take his own step forward, in return.

True to his word, Viktor does return again, a little bit later that night, and Jayce is still sitting up when he arrives. Viktor is even quieter than he was before, strangely courteous in his actions, and doesn't speak more than he needs to as he helps Jayce through each of his physical needs.

Jayce doesn't speak more than he needs to, either—the gears in his mind still turning after their last conversation—but he lets Viktor move him around in a simple wheelchair, one that allows him access in and out of the bathroom, and Jayce splashes cold water on his face as he sits in front of a large, haunting mirror that hangs inside the dark laboratory space.

When Viktor finally takes Jayce back to his cot, helping him back into the bed, Jayce finds that Viktor has left a new, warmer plate of food—meat, rice, and pan-fried vegetables—upon Jayce's side table. Viktor looks at him for a long, tired second, before bidding him a quick goodnight and slipping out of Jayce's presence just as quickly as he'd originally come.

Jayce doesn't call him back—still not ready, he thinks, for a continuation of their earlier conversation—and so he looks down, pulling the warm bowl closer to himself. He's a mixture of confused, angry, and pensive—pain still burning up the right side of his body, especially after his short trip to the bathroom—but the food is decent enough, and Jayce knows that he needs to eat.

Thoughts of Viktor continue to plague him while he does—the pleasure of decent food still not enough to distract him from his conflicted feelings. Viktor, his morals, his words and his apologies—Jayce's feelings on all of them sit heavily in his mind while he eats, and Jayce ends up clearing his plate far sooner than he clears his mind.

However, by the end of the night, Jayce has come to the uneasy conclusion that what he feels now—even more than anger—is a quiet, tentative curiosity. He doesn't know the full picture, not from Viktor's point of view at least, and it's very possible that he's never known it. He doesn't fully understand Viktor as he is now, yet he finds himself wanting to, and that realization leaves Jayce tired, but ultimately unsurprised.

Jayce knows he's always been drawn to Viktor as an individual—ever since the start of their time at the Academy—and despite everything, Jayce can admit that that fact hasn't changed. He's willing to give Viktor another chance, if only because he feels he might learn something from it, and also, possibly, because he feels as though Viktor has been more than willing to give him the same.

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When Viktor enters his room the next day, Jayce steels himself. He'd been practicing what he wanted to say all night prior, the words running madly through his mind, and he breathes deeply as Viktor steps up and sets down his breakfast.

"I thought about what you said," Jayce begins, carefully, and Viktor slows in his motions, hovering awkwardly by Jayce's side as he continues to pick up Jayce's empty dishes from the night before.

"Good," Viktor replies, solidly, after a moment's pause. "I'm glad that you did."

Jayce waits for him to say something else, but when he doesn't, Jayce takes another long, deep breath, and tries to push down his quiet discomfort.

"You might be right," Jayce says, slowly. "I don't understand you fully, and it's possible that I never have."

Viktor nods, and Jayce continues, his voice as steady as he can make it. "I'm no longer sure that I know what happened the day that you tried to kill me, and I recognize that my version of the truth has always been different than yours. Thus, I accept your apology there. However, I still believe that your modifying of my body without my consent—even while I was unconscious and near death—is something just as deserving of an apology, and I stand by that fact."

Viktor grunts, but doesn't speak, and Jayce lets out a sigh—his human hand coming up to brush back his hair. "That said," Jayce says, quietly, "I *am* grateful that you saved my life. And I was being... dramatic when I told you that it would have been better if you'd let me die. So thank you, for that."

"You're welcome," Viktor finally responds, once Jayce has stopped talking and his eyes have darted as far away from Viktor's face as possible. Viktor's voice is quiet, curious, and almost surprised, and it makes Jayce even more uncomfortable than he was before.

Jayce darts a glance at Viktor's metal, emotionless face, before staring forward once more, his voice hard. "There's more I want to talk to you about—a lot of other questions I still want to have answered, especially about our fight in your lab—but that's all I wanted to say to you. And I'd appreciate it if you'd leave, now that I'm done."

Viktor makes a noise that's maybe almost a snort, his voice even quieter than before as he nods and makes his way out the door.

"Alright," he replies, and Jayce stares hard at the wall in front of him, wishing his face were as much a mask as Viktor's is. "I will. Have a good afternoon, Jayce, and I'll see you again tonight."

And Jayce replies, steadily and more wholeheartedly than he'd originally meant to: "Thank you."

Chapter 3

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

After the conclusion of their second argument, things between them feel a little bit different. Viktor still keeps his distance the next morning, his words short as he greets Jayce and sets down his breakfast, yet Jayce can tell he's more at ease than he was the last time Jayce awoke: his posture less rigid as he walks in, his breathing less carefully measured.

Jayce eats his food—some sort of meat atop a mess of eggs and rice—while Viktor tidies the worktable in front of Jayce's cot, and Jayce makes a low noise, frowning around a mouthful of food, as he finishes clearing his plate.

"So what did happen with the explosions at the College?" Jayce asks, finally, and Viktor glances back to look at him. "Did they catch whoever was behind it?"

They're simple questions, ones without much weight behind them, and Viktor shakes his head. "No, but I do know that the Professors have been working alongside some of the nearby Barons to figure out who did it. They think it was some sort of... politically motivated terrorist group. Or something of the like. Either way, I'm trying not to get any more involved."

"Huh," Jayce grunts, swallowing and setting aside his empty bowl. "Can you trust the Barons to handle it?"

Viktor makes a noise that sounds almost like a snort. "Who else is the College supposed to go to?"

"I have connections with the police in Piltover," Jayce starts, but Viktor waves away his words.

"Don't bother," he replies, voice hard. "They already sent down a couple of officers as a show of support—an obviously empty gesture. If they cared about the attack, they'd do more than send down a couple of green recruits."

Jayce frowns, and Viktor turns back towards the work table, his third arm still facing Jayce.

"I'm sure if I spoke to them, they'd send more people down," Jayce says. "Especially if they knew I was involved—Vi and her partner would likely even come down, themselves." Viktor murmurs a non-reply, continuing to clear his station, and the silence stretches slightly too long before Viktor turns back to look at him, again.

"You think very highly of yourself," Viktor eventually says, voice even, and Jayce bites his lip.

"For good reason," he says, heated, and Viktor makes another snort-adjacent noise. "Don't the Academy and my Clan know what happened to me? I'd assume the police would, at this point, too."

Viktor nods, slowly. "I would assume they know by now, yes," he replies, and Jayce grimaces.

"What does that mean?"

"It means that I contacted the Academy about what happened," Viktor explains, carefully, "but didn't explicitly tell them that you were here with me."

“You didn’t tell the Academy about where I was?” Jayce asks, voice mildly incredulous.

“Not in so many words,” Viktor replies, somewhat stiffly. “But only because I didn’t want any Piltover Academics breaking into my house in your name.”

Jayce grinds his teeth. “Then where the hell do they think I am right now?”

“At a hospital down the street,” Viktor says, reciting the address easily. “But to be fair, I’d fully intended to transfer you there as soon as you’d awoke.”

“Do you not plan to, still?” Jayce asks, and Viktor stops in his work, finally turning around to look Jayce fully in the eye. His backlit eyes are fully open, not narrowed and dangerous like they’d been the morning prior, and Jayce feels his throat go dry.

“Only if you’d like me to,” Viktor replies, quietly. “They’ll have lesser knowledge of augment-work, but will likely be able to support your recovery better than I could.”

He pauses, head cocked, and Jayce stars back at him.

“Would you like me to get you admitted?” Viktor finally asks. “I could have your paperwork done by the end of the night.”

Jayce blinks, swallowing shallowly. He wants, very desperately, to get out of this tiny cellblock of a room. But would a Zaunite hospital be preferable? *Potentially, yes,* Jayce thinks—if only because he wouldn’t have to deal with Viktor.

And yet, Jayce grimaces at the thought; Zaunite hospitals with their Zaunite doctors and their visiting hours that Viktor likely wouldn’t even show up to. Would he want that? In some ways, it feels like Viktor is moments away from slipping through his fingers, draining from his life just as quickly as he’d been poured back in, and Jayce’s grimace deepens.

“Don’t bother,” he finally decides, and Viktor’s shoulder raises in a half shrug. “I still have more stuff I want to talk to you about, anyway.”

Jayce leans back against the wall as casually as he can, yet lets out a heavy grunt as his hip flares up again with the movement. Pain, no longer forgotten, shoots up through his side, and Jayce sucks in a breath, gritting his teeth as Viktor pushes himself away from his desk.

“Was that your hip?” Viktor asks him, a frown in his voice, and Jayce just nods: his breath coming out in sharp, whistle-like gasps as he pushes air forcibly through his teeth. “Are you still feeling pain in your side?”

“Should I *not* be?” Jayce grunts, the pain slowly returning to a dull ache as he steadies his breathing once more. “The pain has barely let up—I feel like I’ve just gotten better at ignoring it.”

Viktor makes a small, heavy noise, walking carefully over to Jayce’s side. “Have you not been doing the exercises I told you to?” he asks, a frown in the sigh that releases from his mask.

There’s some amount of confusion—exhaustion? exasperation?—in his voice, and Jayce considers the words quietly, his grimace growing as he vaguely recalls Viktor telling him to do joint exercises back on his first night here.

“Ah,” Jayce replies, voice cracking. “Not really.”

“Not *really*—” repeats Viktor, scoffing heavily. “Of course you haven’t been, I should have

realized. I was surprised I hadn't found you collapsed on the floor already, trying to walk—stupid of me."

Viktor sighs again, and Jayce gets a little bit defensive at that. "It wasn't like I was in any state to remember what you said that night," he huffs. "I'm surprised I even remember it now; if anything, you should have been the one reminding me."

"Yes, alright," Viktor concedes, voice clipped, "I probably should have. But what's done is done—it just means we'll have to do them now."

Jayce watches as Viktor walks back over to the work table and pulls the slightly splintered chair back towards Jayce's bed. Jayce recoils slightly, remembering what happened the last time he'd brought that chair over, but Viktor simply sits down, extending his robotic arm out to the side. *It's his right arm,* Jayce realizes, *that's robotic*— the same side as his—and Viktor makes a noise to catch Jayce's attention, pointing down at his wrist.

"Right then, I'll walk you through it all again now," Viktor says, and Jayce nods slowly. "You'll want to be flexing your muscles, and giving your joints consistent movement throughout the day," Viktor tells him, flexing his left arm in the way that he'd described and pointing out the locations where Jayce needs to focus his attention.

Viktor does the same with his left leg, shifting slightly in his chair so that Jayce can see the exercises that Viktor wants him to complete, and Jayce watches him carefully—following through with the motions alongside each of Viktor's demonstrations.

Sharp pain jolts up his arm and simmers at his shoulder as he does so, and Jayce grits his teeth, watching as the fingers of his metal hand flex open and closed upon his command. Jayce repeats the stretches a second time, cursing through his teeth as the pain continues to flare. Viktor watches him from his seat next to the bed, and hums as Jayce finishes his second set.

"How does it feel?" Viktor asks him after he finishes. "Unnatural?"

Jayce almost lets a rude, disgruntled response slip past his lips, but stops himself in time. "It's about as weird as I expect it to be," he says instead. "And my side still hurts."

"It will for another day or so," Viktor replies, "maybe two." And Jayce grunts, feeling mildly foolish as he repeats the motions a third time.

"You said you were surprised I wasn't trying to walk already," Jayce says, as he stretches his leg out. "Would I have been walking by now, if I'd been doing your exercises?"

Part of him dreads the answer—positive or negative—but he asks the question anyway, curiosity taking over.

"Yes," Viktor replies, slowly. "I expect that you might have, especially given... the type of person that you are."

Viktor pauses.

"An asshole?" Jayce prompts, his smile wry, and when Viktor shrugs, it's not completely a denial.

"I was thinking more along the lines of stubborn," Viktor replies, conversationally, and somehow it doesn't feel like an insult—simply a statement of fact. "Persistent, perhaps."

Jayce shakes his head, but doesn't deny those words, either. Viktor watches him casually, bright

eyes blinking on and off as Jayce begins running through his third set of exercises.

“Will I be able to walk again soon, then?” Jayce asks, and Viktor nods from his chair, arms crossed against his chest.

“It’s likely,” Viktor replies. “You’re the only individual with new leg augments that I haven’t discharged yet.”

Jayce frowns, slowing in his exercises as he runs Viktor’s words through his mind. “Discharged?” he repeats, and Viktor nods.

“There were a few others with injuries similar to yours,” Viktor says, tapping his fingers against his own metal arm. “They’re all still on crutches, but opted not to recover here with me.”

Unsurprising, Jayce almost says, knee-jerk, before catching himself.

“They were all caught in the explosions, too?” he asks instead, surprised, despite himself. And Viktor nods again, the smallest inclination of the head.

“A good number,” Viktor replies, voice subdued. “Some of whom had more severe wounds than you. Most of them made it—and I have, since then, transferred them to legitimate hospitals—but there were a couple that I wasn’t able to save.”

“Huh,” Jayce blinks. “You actually tried to save other people, then—besides me?”

Viktor scoffs. “You’re not special,” he says, the words exasperated and almost snide, and yeah—maybe he worded that a bit wrong.

Jayce looks down at his hands, and figures he shouldn’t be surprised: he knows, better than most, how highly Viktor values life and the continued existence of it. There’s no reason for him to be as surprised as he is that he’s not the only one Viktor helped in the aftermath of the attack on the College.

Jayce swallows a rude reply again—something he’s been working on, and something he’d be prouder of, if it weren’t for the fact that it’s Viktor, right now, that he’s talking to—and he replies, short and clipped, “I know.”

Viktor sits there for a moment, staring silently back at him, and Jayce breathes, looking anywhere but at Viktor, until Viktor finally stands up—walking across the room and retrieving a small jar of oil and a dirty rag. Viktor sets them both down on the table next to Jayce’s empty bowl, and points to a set of areas in his arm where metal sits flush against metal.

“Oil your joints before I come back with your next meal, as well as these locations where the metal grates,” Viktor says, taking time to point out additional areas along Jayce’s hip and leg. He demonstrates the locations on himself, just as he did before, and Jayce nods, glancing down at the jar. “You won’t need to do this often—just every week or so—but this, too, should help with the pain.”

Jayce nods again, and when Viktor finally leaves, empty dishware in hand, Jayce sits there, thinking about the other people that Viktor tried to save, and oils his aching metal limbs.

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Viktor comes back with more food a few hours later, and Jayce watches him as he sets down a hot bowl of something that looks like stew. Viktor checks to make sure he’s oiled his joints well

enough, before moving to place the oil and rag back on the far worktable, among the various other small tools that rest there.

When he returns, he places another set of objects atop Jayce's side table, and Jayce looks up from his stew to find a small stack of paper and a dark pen.

"Since you'll be bedridden for a little while longer," Viktor says, "it might be good for you to start writing again. I know your right hand was your dominant one before, and if you'd like to send a letter to the Academy or to your Clan at any point soon, you'll likely want to start practicing your lettering now."

Jayce looks down at his right hand—now dark grey metal—then sets his stew back down on his table, picking up the pen.

As expected, his right hand now writes worse than his left—all fine motor control now lost, alongside the arm itself. His fingers feel stiff and uncooperative, even when they respond in line with his expectations, and Jayce writes his name shakily across the piece of paper that Viktor had placed in front of him. His wrist hurts after he finishes the motion, and the knuckles of his fingers ache as he sets down the pen.

"I think it would be easier," Jayce states, frowning down at his scrawled out name, "for me to simply train my left hand to become my dominant one."

"If that's what you want to do," Viktor replies, "then by all means."

Jayce sighs, glares at his hand, and writes his name again.

He switches off between his right and left hands, his movements jerky and annoyingly inaccurate, and decides that he might as well teach himself to become ambidextrous.

He tells Viktor as much as he finishes the rest of his stew, and Viktor makes a small, funny noise that sounds almost like a laugh.

Viktor cleans up once Jayce has finished eating, refilling his water and leaving it upon the table. He leaves the paper and pen as well, and for the rest of the night, Jayce sits in his laboratory room and practices his alphabet.

- -

It's Viktor's idea, the next day, for him to start keeping a journal.

"It'll be good practice," Viktor says, before passing Jayce a small notebook that—given the evidence of ripped out pages towards the front of the book—Jayce figures came directly from his lab. Jayce flips through the pages with his left hand, and notes that the rest of the pages are, more or less, still completely blank.

"You couldn't have brought me a new one?" he asks, and Viktor grunts, passing him a set of simple, oil-ink pens.

"If you really want a nicer book, I can get you one when your handwriting improves," Viktor replies, "but for now, I think something simpler to practice in would be for the best."

Jayce sighs, but doesn't disagree.

By the end of the day, Jayce has fashioned a good enough letter to Clan Giopara that he's happy

with sending it off. Viktor reads it silently, not commenting on Jayce's handwriting, before nodding once and letting Jayce know that he'll send it off the next morning. Jayce nods in return, happy enough with the writing he produced, and spends the remainder of the evening switching off between doing stretches to ease the pain out of his joints, and writing scratchy alphabets, many times over, within the pages of his semi-new notebook.

It feels strange, being mildly cordial with Viktor again, but Jayce finds he doesn't mind it. The past couple days have been strange as they'd danced around each other—Viktor, more than Jayce, given his bedridden state—but their conversations now flow easily enough, and Jayce no longer feels the need to argue with Viktor at every given opportunity.

There are many things left unsaid between them, yet Jayce goes to sleep that night feeling more content than he'd felt at any other point since waking up in Viktor's lab. His side hurts less than it did the night before, and Clan Giopara will know, soon enough, that he's doing alright, and that he'll be returning as soon as he can. It feels as though Jayce is finally getting his life back into some sort of semblance of order—like he's finally gaining back some tangible amount of control—and although he still wishes things hadn't happened in the way that they did, he's grateful enough to be alive.

Jayce knows that it will be hard to accept his new limbs as his own, but he thinks, perhaps, that *acceptance* is something he needs to work on, anyway. After all, the most he can do right now—especially given his bedridden state—is to learn to accept his situation for what it is.

And that can't be so hard, right?

- -

"I'm going to try standing up," Jayce decides aloud the next day, immediately fed up with doing nothing more than accepting his situation for what it is.

Viktor snorts as he enters the room, setting down Jayce's first meal with one hand, and he replies: "Alright, Defender—but don't be mad when I have to help you back up."

Jayce frowns, but doesn't grace that with a reply.

Carefully, he shifts himself onto the edge of his bed, legs falling down to brace themselves against the floor for the first time in a long while. It hurts—the angle different from those that Jayce has gotten used to while laying and sitting down on his bed—and Jayce glances up to where Viktor stands across the room, a few paces away.

"Are you alright?" Viktor asks him, eyes gleaming, and Jayce grimaces at him, gripping the bedsheets tighter in his hands.

"Yes," Jayce grits out, the soles of his feet grinding hard into the floor as he starts to push himself up into a standing position, "This is fine, I'm fine—"

"Are you?" Viktor asks again, monotone, and Jayce curses, his right knee weak as he braces himself against the bed. His leg burns a hot, teeth clenching white, and Jayce has to remain hanging off the bed, as much weight in his left arm as he can possibly put into it, while Viktor watches on from above.

Jayce leans up against the bed, breath heavy, and he feels his knees buckle under him as he tries to straighten again—collapsing down to the ground in a tired, painful heap.

Viktor steps up to him, one hand offered carefully down towards Jayce, and Jayce looks at him for

a moment, face contorted, before allowing himself to be helped back up onto his bed.

Jayce's face burns—and whether it's from pain or the simmering humiliation that comes from being seen as weak, Jayce doesn't want to know. He sits at the edge of his bed as Viktor steps back, and tries to stand up again.

"Don't strain yourself," Viktor warns, and Jayce ignores him, still doing his best to brace himself against the bed. He tries and fails to stand up fully another couple times—Viktor helping him back up after each quiet collapse—but eventually, Jayce manages to keep his weight on his legs for more than a half-second.

Viktor stays with him through the rest of the day: showing him where to put pressure and how to start distributing his weight as he gets used to standing upright again. He still keeps his distance—only touching Jayce after Jayce has given him permission to, and never for longer than he needs—and Jayce, remarkably, finds himself getting used to Viktor's presence.

When he's not monitoring Jayce's sad attempts to stand, Viktor is either standing or sitting at the worktable across the room, writing in a small notebook, or reading through the sheets of paper that he'd brought with him to work on.

A couple times, he leaves to bring Jayce new food and drink, and—as Jayce sits and eats each meal while Viktor busies himself at the worktable—he makes note of the fact that Viktor never brings back anything for himself. Jayce realizes, absently, that he's not even sure if Viktor still *needs* to eat—or, even, if he can.

Jayce frowns, quickly pushing *that* thought aside before it can spiral out of control.

Later that evening, after Viktor has deemed him decent enough at standing to start practicing walking, Viktor brings him a set of crutches. Jayce lets Viktor help him, leaning against his single hand for support, and he spends his final hour hopping around the room in an attempt to get used to the motion of it. Viktor's hand is there to steady him each time he starts to sway or buckle downwards, and Jayce finds himself mildly grateful for the help that Viktor has, inexplicably, been more than willing to provide.

Once Jayce is back in his bed, Viktor leans the crutches up against the wall by Jayce's head, and he makes Jayce promise not to continue practicing with them until after he returns the next morning to supervise.

Viktor sighs, soft and exasperated as Jayce promises, twice over, and he bids Jayce a short, quiet goodnight not long afterward. The dark door closes behind him, and Jayce sits there for a single second—knowing very well that Viktor expects him to practice with the crutches in his absence, regardless of any promise—before pushing himself off the bed, crutches in hand once more.

Viktor wouldn't have left them with him if he was actually worried about Jayce using them while he was gone, especially not within arms reach, and Jayce holds to that thought as he practices walking back and forth—from the countertops to the bed to the worktable to the door—for the remainder of the night.

- -

The next morning, Jayce is tired and sore, but he's decent enough at using the crutches that Viktor just sighs, shaking his head and asking whether Jayce feels strong enough to take a tour of the lab. And Jayce—more than ready to get out of his tiny cell of a room—answers with a very prompt yes, despite the ache that runs throughout his body.

As it turns out, the building that he's in is much larger than Jayce had originally expected, with winding hallways and staircases to additional floors that Jayce firmly decides he doesn't wish to attempt. They walk through the halls, and Viktor notes the functions of each room that they pass. There's the bathroom that Viktor has been wheeling him to, alongside a number of other small, cot-filled rooms, and Viktor confirms Jayce's assumption that those were the rooms in which he treated the other survivors of the explosion.

The halls of Viktor's lab are the same dark metal that Jayce has grown used to, yet decorated with delicate wrought-iron patterns around the gas lamps and small, flickering candles that line its walls. Small alcoves—with taped up diagrams and loose books that litter the floor—sit at the end of each hallway that they turn from, and Jayce has to pause at more than one of them: sitting down and catching his breath while Viktor stands off to the side. The alcoves are surprisingly messy, given what he remembers of Viktor from their time at the Academy, but Jayce figures they've both changed quite a bit since then, and can't hold it against him.

"My main laboratory," Viktor says, once they've started walking again, turning the corner towards a set of open double doors. Jayce looks in to find a cavernous—and very, very familiar—room, and he stands there, clutching at his crutches, as his stomach starts to turn.

It's the same laboratory that Jayce nearly died in the last time he was here, and the same laboratory that he had heartily destroyed afterward. The entirety of the room has been redesigned and partially rebuilt, yet Jayce would recognize the room—its dimensions, its layout—from anywhere.

Viktor doesn't step inside, so neither does Jayce, simply staring out into the lab as the low buzz of machinery and the groan of various active automatons filters out into their hall.

"What you said the other day," Jayce asks slowly, thinking back to the list of strained-topic questions that he's kept at the back of his mind, "about me preventing you from saving hundreds of lives? Did that happen here?"

Jayce can tell that Viktor knows what he's talking about, because Viktor stiffens slightly, turning round to look at him. "Yes," Viktor replies, evenly, "that is correct."

Jayce clutches his crutches harder in his hands. "Then those people that were hooked up to the crystal... were they still alive, when I destroyed it?"

"Yes," Viktor replies, again, the word short and quiet. "They were."

And Jayce looks back out at the lab where he had fought Viktor that day, the memory clouding his thoughts. He'd confronted Viktor about that magical, stolen crystal right here in this room, so many years ago, while dozens of slumped, soulless-looking bodies had littered the ground around him.

Those bodies are gone now, but Jayce still remembers the vivid, gut-wrenching disgust that he had felt upon seeing them, their brains exposed, limbs lifeless, and wires spilling from their skin.

He had thought they were dead. He had thought, perhaps foolishly, that Viktor had been trying to resurrect them.

And, if Viktor's words are to be believed, then Jayce had (inadvertently, unintentionally) been the one who had killed them in the end.

"Do you understand what it looked like—to me, back then?" Jayce asks quietly, and Viktor makes a low humming noise, bright eyes still boring holes into Jayce's face, even as Jayce turns away.

“I suppose I can imagine,” Viktor replies, and Jayce sighs, grinding his teeth as his mind continues to supply memories from that day.

“I’m sorry,” Jayce says, his voice low and careful, “but I really wish you had thought to tell me what was going on, instead of just trying to kill me.”

“I didn’t believe you would understand, nor did I think you would try to,” Viktor replies, turning away. “It was... complicated. But—perhaps it was my mistake not to.”

Perhaps, Jayce thinks, viciously, but doesn’t say anything more. They continue staring out at the main room of the laboratory, and Jayce’s eyes jump between the various finished and half-finished automatons that are arranged around the room. Some of them are moving, doing work for Viktor that looks menial yet necessary, while others lie still: no semblance of power running through their mechanical veins.

“I apologize, again, for trying to kill you,” Viktor says finally, and Jayce sighs, turning away from Viktor and his large, looming laboratory.

“I suppose we can call it even,” Jayce replies, voice absent, “since you’ve saved my life at this point, too.”

Viktor turns alongside him, not replying, and they continue to make their way down the hall. Jayce’s stomach still churns, his mind pushing away thoughts of the corpses that were actually bodies (which soon become corpses anyway), and he concentrates on walking properly with crutches as Viktor leads him away.

Viktor takes him through the rest of the building even slower than he did before, showing him where the various other bedrooms and lab rooms are located, and talking all the while. There are a few small offices, each of which Viktor has dedicated to a different, specific set of projects, and one large workshop that sits down the hall from the main lab that’s littered with heavy machinery and a few lovely specialty machines. Viktor introduces it as his main workshop, and Jayce resolves to explore the room a bit more thoroughly, perhaps within the next couple of days, and see if Viktor won’t let him try anything out.

They loop back—around the rear of the machine shop—and Viktor shows him to a set of staircases, the first of which leads up to his quarters and to the outward-facing space that sits along Emberlift Alley, and the second of which leads down to what Viktor states is storage, more dedicated workrooms, and a few other lab spaces.

By the time they’ve made it back to Jayce’s room, both Jayce’s upper back and hips are in a decent amount of pain, and Jayce sits heavily down on the bed, stretching out his legs as he does so.

“I’ll bring you some additional sets of clothing tonight,” Viktor tells him, as he settles back, “now that you can walk around and change on your own. They won’t be very fancy, but they’ll be better than the hospital gowns.”

Jayce makes an appreciative grunt, fully fed up with the loose articles of clothing that he’d been wearing since his second day of being bedridden. “Dinner, too?” he asks, and Viktor nods.

“Yes, I was planning on it.”

Jayce nods back and watches him leave. After a few minutes of stretching and a couple more in consideration, he pulls out the notebook that Viktor gave him the other day, and flips past his first few shaky attempts at the alphabet. He moves to pen in the date, before realizing he still doesn't

know it, and Jayce grimaces, leaving space at the top of the page. He'll ask Viktor when he returns.

For the next hour, Jayce writes—memories of Viktor's lab flashing through his mind. His writing is just as jumbled as his thoughts, but the slow reflection and release is helpful, and so Jayce simply lets his mind go.

Viktor had been trying to save people. Viktor has always been trying to save people—and Jayce, in his own brash and misunderstood way, has fought him on it, at every turn. The methods of Viktor's saving had been, as they've always seemed to be, a little bit roundabout, perhaps a little misguided; yet Jayce has come to recognize that his heart has always been in the right place—even if he hadn't believed it to be, before. Viktor had been trying to save people, and Jayce had, apparently, gone on to kill them all.

It's a revelation he hadn't been expecting to receive, not today, not *ever*, and the ink of Jayce's pen bleeds into the page as his hand stills in place, mind racing.

He wasn't in the wrong—Viktor was the one who had stolen the crystal from him in the first place, and Viktor was the one who hadn't explained his motives properly when Jayce confronted him. But at the same time, it wasn't as though Viktor had been completely in the wrong, either—had he? He'd tried to explain his need for the crystal, and Jayce had turned him away, believing his intentions to be malicious. But they weren't, not at their heart, Jayce reminds himself—at least, not according to the Viktor he'd been speaking to, earlier today.

If Viktor is to be believed, then the Viktor that Jayce had fought with, many years ago in his lab, had been a Viktor that had been trying, desperately, to save people.

If, Jayce reminds himself again, *Viktor is to be believed.*

Jayce writes, thinks, and in the end, the only truth that Jayce allows himself to settle upon is that everything is prefaced by a need to trust in Viktor's words—a need to trust in a Viktor who may, or may not, be able to be believed. Any other conclusions feel too difficult, too trying for him to grasp, and Jayce breathes, thinks about what he's learned, and sits back in his bed. He's quiet until Viktor returns, sometime later that night, with a couple new sets of clothes and a heavy bowl of bread and curry.

Viktor sits with him while he eats, asking after Jayce's needs for the evening, and Jayce thinks, pushing thoughts of the lab—thoughts of trusting Viktor—out of his mind. Now that he can use his crutches, living will be significantly easier for him, and the rickety wheelchair will—thank the gods—no longer be necessary.

Jayce wonders if he's going to be discharged soon—just like Viktor said he would be, once he was able to make the trip back to Piltover—but he pushes those thoughts from his mind as well, before perking up as he remembers something he hadn't thought about in a long time.

"Do you still have a Tak set?" Jayce asks, and Viktor looks down at him sharply, the hand of his third arm flexing open.

"I—yes, of course," Viktor replies. "Though it's been a while since I've played. I'd... have to go and find it." His voice falters for a second, but he straightens in his chair as Jayce nods, eager to do something more than dwell angrily upon his thoughts.

"The people at the Academy are as shit at the game as ever," Jayce says, and Viktor almost laughs. "It would be nice to play against someone decent, again."

And then Viktor nods, too, his voice strangely soft as he replies. “Alright then. I’ll look for it tonight, and we can play a match tomorrow morning.”

- -

Jayce settles into a rhythm after that. As the next couple of days pass, Jayce takes time to wander through Viktor’s lab at odd hours of the day—working his legs and building his stamina. Viktor continues to help him get used to his prosthetics, showing him how to care for his arm and leg properly, and gets frustrated, voice thin, when Jayce doesn’t dry them properly after showering. They play Tak on Jayce’s side table each night as Jayce eats dinner, and Viktor is just as fiendishly good as Jayce remembers, despite, in Viktor’s own words, the fact that he hasn’t played in years.

Jayce continues to write in his notebook—now, practically a journal—each day as well, and as he reflects on his progress, he realizes that he’s actually begun enjoying Viktor’s presence in his life: a far cry from what he would have said, just a few days prior.

The two of them fit together easily, steadily slipping back into an old sort of friendship—the one they used to have when they were younger—and though Viktor’s emotional responses are somewhat subdued in comparison to what Jayce remembers of them, Jayce still finds himself growing more and more comfortable in this new Viktor’s presence.

Their conversations sometimes slip back into age-old arguments on morality and free will—Jayce often asking small, tentative questions to feel out where Viktor’s beliefs now lie—yet without the pressure of lives on the line, Jayce finds he actually enjoys their discussions more often than not. They’re still strained topics, and Jayce does his best to avoid Viktor’s main laboratory whenever he can, but Jayce finds himself learning to accept Viktor’s views as they are, and Viktor, albeit reluctantly, appears to be doing the same.

It’s a strange realization, the fact that he’s growing to like Viktor once again, but it’s not an unwelcome one. In fact, Jayce finds himself hardly surprised, as he thinks back to their friendship at the Academy and how easily they’d fallen into friendship there. They’d worked together well, and though many things have changed since then, Jayce doesn’t believe their compatibility has lessened.

“Couldn’t you have made them look a bit cooler?” Jayce asks Viktor one evening, over a game of Tak, and Viktor lifts his head—staring back at Jayce from over the game board.

“Made what look cooler?” Viktor asks, and Jayce lifts his arm, flexing it under the candlelight.

“My prosthetics,” Jayce says, and Viktor shakes his head, heaving a sigh.

“I think they look perfectly fine,” he replies, looking back down at the board to make his next move.

Jayce grunts, still looking down at his arm. “That’s because you have no sense of style,” he says, and Viktor sighs again, moving one of his stones.

“I’m not sure you do, either,” Viktor murmurs, and Jayce takes affront to that. “But I suppose we could always design you something more... your style, if that’s what you’d like.”

Jayce thinks about this as he takes his turn, moving a stack of stones and watching his right arm glint in the light as he does so. “Yes, please,” he replies, and Viktor nods.

“It will take time,” Viktor tells him, taking his turn immediately after Jayce, “as I still have other work I need to finish up before I can work on any new designs.”

And Jayce replies absently, words flippant as he stares down at the board. “That’s fine,” he says, “I can wait.” When he finally decides on his move a moment later, he looks up to find Viktor staring at him, candlelight dancing bright against his mask.

“Can you?” Viktor asks him, quietly. “Were you not planning on leaving soon, now that you can walk?”

“I—well, I hadn’t explicitly been planning on it,” Jayce admits, slowly, with some amount of confusion. “But only because I figured you’d want me here for the rest of my recovery process.”

Viktor looks back at him curiously, backlit eyes blinking once. “I’m not going to keep you here,” Viktor says, finally, “if you don’t want to stay.”

And Jayce breathes out a soft “oh,” shoulders falling slightly. “But I thought—well, I suppose I never really asked. Am I really free to leave?”

“Yes, of course,” Viktor replies, evenly, “and to be completely honest, I expected that you would have—quite some time ago.” Jayce looks down, eyebrows furrowing, and Viktor seems to backpedal a bit: his voice thin, tenuous as a flame.

“That’s not to say you *should* have left already,” Viktor says, stressing the word. “Especially since you’re still getting used to using your prosthetics. But, you should know that you’re welcome to leave whenever you want to, and I’ll tell you what you need to do in order to finish your recovery on your own.”

The words sit between them, and Jayce glances up, slow and uncertain.

“Do you want me to leave, Viktor?” he asks, and Viktor doesn’t reply right away.

“I think,” he says, pausing slightly before continuing, “it would be more beneficial for you to stay, simply so that I may monitor your recovery while you’re here.”

He pauses again, and Jayce sucks in a breath, holding Viktor’s gaze.

“And I’ll admit,” Viktor finally says, his voice quiet, “that I haven’t minded your company, thus far.”

He stops, and Jayce feels his heart beat heavily in his chest. Not for the first time since he’d awoken in Viktor’s lab, Jayce wishes, quite adamantly, that he could still see Viktor’s face. He knows that such a request likely isn’t realistic, especially considering the fact that, as far as he knows, Viktor’s face no longer exists. It may very well be that this mask of metal that sits flush against Viktor’s head has been fully melded onto Viktor’s human face, and—even if Viktor’s face does still exist in some capacity—then the likelihood of it being the same as Jayce remembers it to be is still fairly low.

And yet, Jayce still wishes he could see it.

(For he knows, if this were the Viktor that he remembers from their time at the Academy, then this Viktor would certainly be flushing.)

Jayce realizes that Viktor didn’t actually answer his question, just danced heavily around it, yet Jayce still swallows heavily, his mouth dry as he replies.

“I haven’t minded your company either,” he admits, simply, and Viktor’s shoulders seem to relax—the movement barely noticeable, were it not for the fact that Jayce had been watching him so

closely.

“Good,” Viktor says, head tilted slightly in Jayce’s direction. “In that case, I suppose I wouldn’t mind it if you’d prefer to finish your recovery here.”

He pauses, the question in his voice, and Jayce nods, slowly.

“I will—” he says, and the words feel too sharp, too immediate as they roll off his tongue. He swallows again and continues, quieter this time. “Stay, I mean—if you don’t mind. At least until I’ve fully recovered.”

Viktor blinks at him, and nods slowly. “Alright,” he says, voice lilting upwards.

“Alright,” Jayce repeats, quiet and decisive as he looks back down at the Tak board and pushes the entirety of their conversation as far into the back of his mind as he can. “I think it’s your turn, then?”

Viktor stares at him a moment longer, before looking back at the board and picking up a stone to make his next move.

They play the rest of their game in near silence, and Jayce finds out the hard way that focusing on Viktor’s hands does even worse things to his heartbeat than thinking about his face.

Chapter End Notes

Tak is a game from The Kingkiller Chronicle, by Patrick Rothfuss.

Chapter 4

Chapter Notes

> Sorry for the delay on this one—next Sunday's chapter should (hopefully) be up on time. Please enjoy!

“I’ll be out today,” Viktor says the next morning, as he sets a bowl of oatmeal down in front of Jayce. “I’m not sure for how long. You’re welcome to explore any part of the lab while I’m away, but I’d advise you not to head out into the streets without me.”

He’s wearing a heavy leather overcoat, one that reaches nearly to the floor, and his third arm appears to have been hidden (or otherwise removed from his person). If Jayce is being completely honest, he looks like he could pass for a fairly normal citizen of Piltover—save for the continued presence of his metal face—and Jayce nods in agreement, having not intended to leave the confines of the lab, anyway.

Viktor bids him goodbye a moment later, and Jayce finishes his oatmeal quickly.

As soon as he’s finished, he tips himself off the bed, crutches in hand, and makes a beeline for Viktor’s workshop. He hadn’t been able to explore the workshop as thoroughly as he’d wanted to before, and Jayce stifles his excitement as he enters the room—breathing in the familiar scent of oil, metal, and coolant.

There are a number of automatons in this room as well, conducting their work quietly and efficiently as Jayce walks through their space. Jayce pays them no mind as he makes his way into the center of the room, rolling his sleeves up and surveying his surroundings. He steps through the various machines scattered throughout the space, touching at their surfaces and wondering if Viktor wouldn’t mind him using them in his absence.

There are the typical machines: the lathes and mills and saws of varying sizes, as well as more specific machines: those designed for specific detail work and plating. Jayce finds small wooden prototypes and the odd woodworking tool hidden throughout the room, yet he recognizes the machine shop to be—at its core—a metalworking facility, and in the end, Jayce can’t help but feel a little bit at home.

As he continues to walk through the shop, Jayce finds welding stations at the back, as well as a small station for delicate soldering work that sits beside a bench littered with sketches and diagrams. Jayce hops his way up to it, shuffling through the papers to find notes on various commissioned jewelry items, baubles, and other wearable tech. Jayce snorts, picking up what looks to be a half-finished ring with protective properties, before setting it down a moment later and making his way to a door that sits, innocuous, against the far back wall of the space.

The door is closed yet unlocked, and so Jayce lets himself inside—lighting a couple solitary lamps in order to get a better look at the space.

The room is small: filled to the brim with books, notebooks, and sketches. Jayce figures it must be Viktor’s primary office as he eyes the large table that sits at the center of the room, and he walks around the table to find a smaller, neater desk situated quietly at the back. Jayce thumbs through

the books scattered across the center table with mild interest: noting the wide variety in both topic and complexity. Eventually, Jayce finds a small, dark notebook that has Viktor's handwriting scrawled neatly across the top of the open page: *New Prosthetics for Jayce?* and Jayce grins as he picks it up to study.

The rest of the page is still blank—no new prosthetic ideas in sight—yet Jayce still feels warm as he reads the words, and he flips through the rest of the book with mild curiosity. The notebook is filled with various other surface-level ideas—sketches of prosthetics, augments, and auxiliary technologies that never feel fully developed—and Jayce turns to the front of the notebook to find *Prosthetic Ideas* printed neatly across the middle, the current year labeled in parentheses beside it.

Jayce set the notebook back down—flipped open to the same page as before—and continued rooting through the rest of the office's contents. All of Viktor's notebooks are filled with some variation of equations, questions, sketches, and fully detailed diagrams, and Jayce flips through each of them in turn: curious and, admittedly, mildly impressed by the level of documentation that Viktor puts into all his work.

Jayce spends the next couple hours reading through Viktor's notebooks, and by the time he feels tired enough to head back to his room, Jayce realizes he's barely made a dent. Viktor still hasn't returned—despite the latening hour—and so Jayce stretches, collects his crutches, and picks out a couple of the more interesting notebooks, before making his way back to his room.

As he goes, he wonders if he mightn't try and brave the stairs up to Viktor's personal quarters; if only to find and steal something from the kitchen that he assumes—or, more, hopes—lies within their depths.

In the end, however, Jayce simply falls back into his bed and reads through the notebooks he'd taken instead—his body feeling far too weary to make the trek, despite the hunger that pangs through his gut.

- -

Viktor arrives later that day, once Jayce has grown bored of reading and has moved back to writing out his thoughts: a couple responses to some of Viktor's theories, and a set of—in his opinion—fairly nice starter sketches of what he wants his next prosthetics to look like.

By the time that Viktor reemerges, he's shed his long, obscuring overcoat, his third arm is back, and in his hands is what Jayce presumes to be his dinner: fish and rice, drenched in some sort of dark looking sauce.

"You've been gone a while," Jayce says, and Viktor nods absently, handing him over his meal.

"Yes," Viktor replies, "I have. We've been running out of food, and I had a few finished items that I needed to drop off with their respective clients."

Jayce snorts, taking the food and handing Viktor the notebooks he'd taken from his workshop office in return. Viktor takes the books with a silent sigh, and Jayce turns away, knowing that the grin on his face isn't guiltless at all.

"Did you go through my office?" Viktor asks, and Jayce shrugs, still grinning, as he begins eating his fish.

"I might have," he replies, and Viktor sighs again. "I have some ideas about improving that breathing mechanism you've been working on—the one on the large desk. Do you want to hear

it?”

Viktor looks at him for a solid, quiet moment, before pulling over the chair from across the room and sitting down in front of Jayce.

“Alright, Defender,” he says, the words almost fond as they slip from the divots upon his face, “indulge me.”

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Jayce is walking around the laboratory later that night—feeling more comfortable as he leans weight onto his prosthetic side—when he passes by Viktor’s workshop again. The lights of the inner office are on, which, though not unusual despite the (very) late hour, piques Jayce’s curiosity.

After all, Viktor had bid him goodnight well over an hour ago.

Jayce enters the workshop, stepping carefully around the machinery until he gets to Viktor’s tiny office, where flickering candlelight illuminates Viktor’s figure: bent heavily over the large center table that sits within the room.

“Viktor?” Jayce starts, and when Viktor turns around—eyes wide—Jayce almost drops his crutches.

Viktor’s face is older, creased and tired as he stares back at Jayce, and his bangs fall dark over his forehead, no longer gelled back to make way for his mask. His lips are thin, parted and moving as he says something Jayce can’t hear, and his jaw cuts sharply up his face, just as it always did. He’s as handsome as Jayce remembers, and it feels strange to see his face again—older, yet unmarred—after so many years apart.

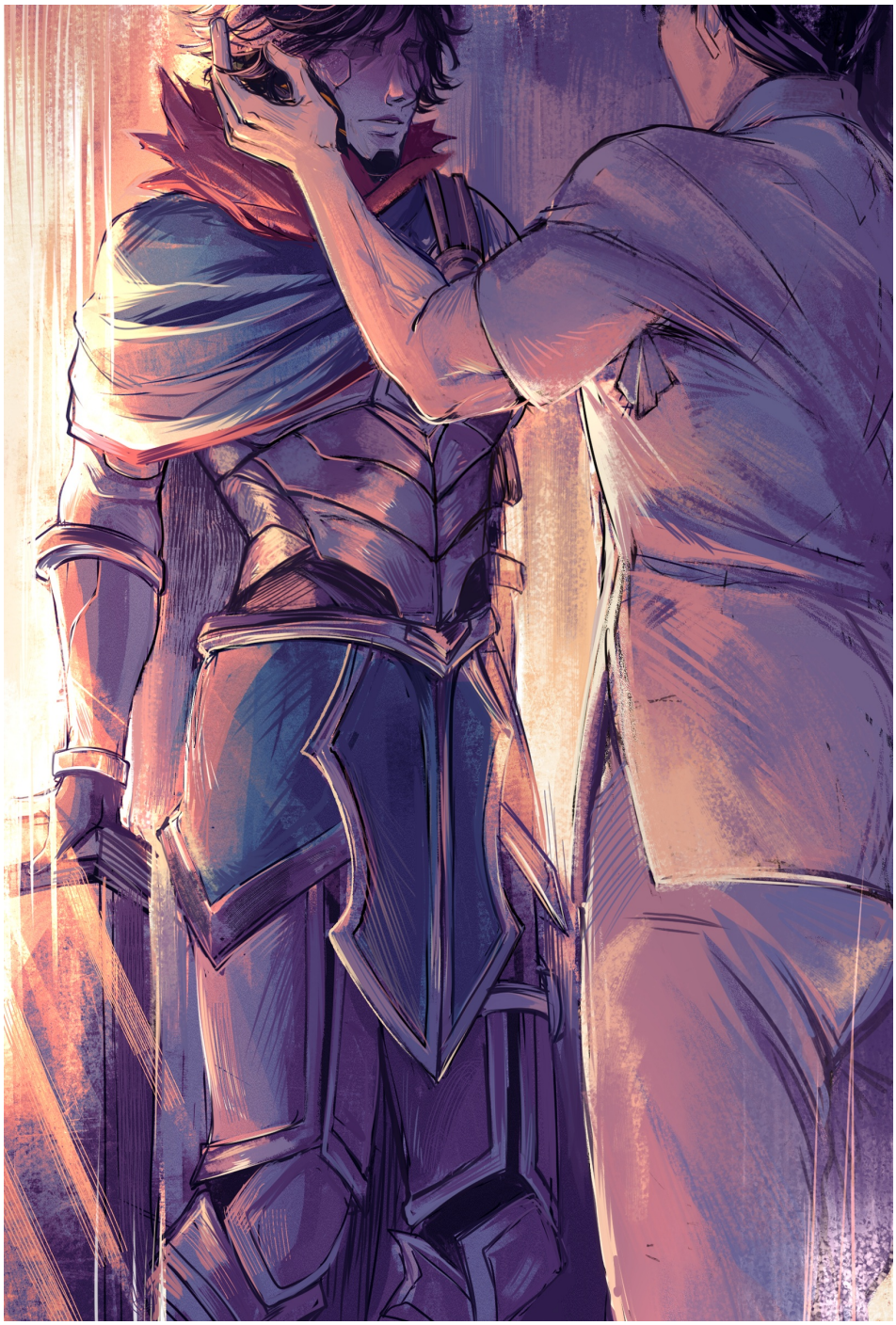
“Ah,” Jayce murmurs, “your face—”

“What about it?” Viktor asks, his eyes narrowing slightly as Jayce enters the room. “I know you’ve seen it before.”

“Well, yes,” Jayce replies, still unable to stifle his surprise, “but, I don’t know, I guess—I guess I’d always thought that you’d replaced your actual face? Fully metal, and all that.”

Jayce frowns as Viktor scoffs, clear eyes casting downwards as Jayce steps closer. “I would have, had I the means to do so. But there’s some amount of delicacy that one has to put into the face, and, well—”

Jayce reaches up to run his fingers along Viktor’s jaw, and Viktor’s words slow to a stop. His face is soft under Jayce’s calloused fingers, and Jayce finds it delightful how carefully Viktor flushes, papers tumbling out of his hands and back onto the desk.



“Excuse me?” Viktor says, hands raising, but not pushing Jayce away. “Jayce, I—”

“I know you worked on your own brain,” Jayce cuts in, staring curiously into Viktor’s eyes. Viktor stops and blinks back at him, his body language defensive even as he resists the urge to pull away. “How is your brain less delicate than your face?”

Viktor breaks eye contact, huffing softly under his breath. “I did operate on parts of my brain—you’re right. But I did so while I was in... an emotional state,” Viktor says, the words coming out exhausted and spiteful as they leave his mouth, “and the damage that it did to my psyche is obvious—even to me.”

Jayce frowns, running the words over in his mind. Viktor picks his mask back up from it’s place on the table, clutching it to himself in both hands, and Jayce notices that although his mechanical fingers remain loose around the thick sheet of metal, his left hand—the hand that still remains fleshy, still human—is white-kunckled in its grip.

“And that damage?” Jayce asks, curiously.

Viktor looks back at him with a grimace. “Has led to emotional instability; heightened levels of anger, muted levels of near everything else.” Viktor looks at him intently—pointedly—and Jayce nods, slowly, thinking back to his first few arguments with Viktor. “My emotions are repressed—not stabilized or removed in the way I’d initially intended—and sometimes they resurface, stronger than they were before.”

Viktor sighs then, eyes weary. His grip loosens on the mask in his hands as he moves to push back his hair, and Jayce watches him, stomach churning, as Viktor returns the mask to his face, the metal visage flush once more against the other man’s skin.

“That’s not to say I regret doing it,” Viktor continues, once his mask is back in place, “for my research has certainly yielded corollary results. However, such a drastic change was perhaps... too difficult for my human hands at the time. There are certain things that must be done with more precision than even the steadiest of hands can provide.”

“I see,” Jayce says, though he doesn’t—not really. He looks down at his own hands: one metal, one flesh. A matching set to Viktor’s own.

“Could you manage such a procedure now?” Jayce asks, flexing his hands, and Viktor replies slowly, evenly.

“Yes, probably,” he replies, a sigh escaping his mask. “I believe I’ve been capable enough to do so for some time now.”

“Then why haven’t you done it?” Jayce asks, looking back up at him.

“It’s not that I haven’t considered it since my initial failure—” Viktor replies, picking his words carefully, yet he pauses—backlit eyes blinking as he crosses his arms over his torso. “But I’ve been busy with other work, and it hasn’t proved a necessity for me... not yet.”

Viktor turns, straightening the papers that he’d dropped upon his desk, and Jayce steps closer up to him, following his gaze to the papers that cover it.

“I’ve been asked to help rebuild parts of the College,” Viktor says, simply, and Jayce knows an intentional deflection when he hears one.

He considers steering their conversation back—curious, despite himself, as to why Viktor has allowed himself to remain in the state that he is—yet he lets the matter fall as Viktor’s new words fully sink in.

“They reached out to me last week,” Viktor continues, “and visiting them earlier today was one of the errands I had to run.”

“Huh,” Jayce replies, shaking off all thoughts of masks and faces and letting himself pore over the various freehand sketches that Vitkor gestures for him to look at. “I didn’t think you were really one for architecture.”

“I’m not,” Viktor replies, shortly, “but they don’t know that. I’ve had a good working relationship with the College for years now, and they appreciated the support I provided after the attack happened. One of the Professors asked me if it would be something I’d want to tackle—”

“—and Valoran knows you don’t know how to say no when it comes to serving your community,” Jayce finishes, smiling slightly, and Viktor turns to him, surely exasperated beneath his metal face —no, mask.

Jayce laughs. “I’m sure you’ll do fine. Your sketches look nice, and even *I* would trust you to design something structurally sound.”

“Of course you would,” Viktor murmurs, turning back down to his work. “It’s the fact that anyone would trust *you* to that always manages to surprise me.”

Jayce laughs again, not even bothering to be upset by that. Viktor walks him through the plans that he’s made, the thoughts he’s had, and the requirements that the Headmasters at the College had provided him with. Jayce listens, cuts in when he has a good idea, and Viktor writes down additional notes in his notebook as he talks, thin fingers writing down his additions in sharp, looping letters.

They spend the night that way—Jayce pulling a chair over from elsewhere in the workshop to sit next to Viktor under the candlelight. It’s work that Jayce hasn’t done in some time now—most of his energy spent on remembering how to use his limbs and trying to write in a decently legible manner with his new right hand—and Viktor lets him fall back into it, two heads bent over a creative problem that doesn’t need urgent solving.

Time passes and their candles melt further down, the night growing long until Jayce finally stretches, his back cracking, and leans back in his seat. Viktor glances up at him, then looks at his clock, then sets his pencil down, a small yawn escaping, quiet and unobtrusive, from beneath his mask.

“I can’t stay up as late as I used to,” Jayce says, and Viktor snorts, rising from his chair and blowing out all the candles but one, which he picks up and holds carefully in his third hand.

“That’s because your body is old,” Viktor replies, watching Jayce rise alongside him. “And because you’ve spent the last two weeks bedridden, after having very nearly died.”

“Has it already been two weeks?” Jayce asks, and Viktor shrugs, candle shifting dangerously above him.

“Near enough.”

They leave the workshop together, Viktor snuffing out the lights as they go, and Jayce walks along beside him, his crutches making softer landings than his feet.

“Why do you always wear your mask?” Jayce asks him, watching candlelight flicker across Viktor’s metal face as they make their way down the hall. “It doesn’t seem like it’s a necessity, with your face still as intact as it was before.”

“I prefer it that way,” Viktor responds, carefully. “Covered. Metal. And, as a bonus, it scares away the people that I do not wish to talk to.”

Jayce snorts, and Viktor doesn’t elaborate further. They walk through the halls of Viktor’s laboratory, each making their way to their respective bedrooms, and when Viktor bids him goodnight at the base of the staircase up to his quarters, Jayce stops—turning to look Viktor in the eye.

“I like seeing your face,” Jayce starts, and his mouth softens into a grimace as he listens to the way the words leave his mouth. “That is, you don’t need to keep your mask on around me, if you don’t want to.”

Viktor studies him, quiet, before nodding once, his voice even. “Alright,” he replies, “I’ll try to remember that.”

And Jayce watches as Viktor turns and walks up his staircase, before making his way to his own bedroom, trying not to let the memory of Viktor's face—soft and creased and quiet under his hand—resurface again before he gets there.

- -

"I have a couple other letters I want to send," Jayce tells Viktor the next day—stepping into his office. Viktor grunts, and Jayce pulls out the same chair he occupied the night before, moving to gather various materials from around Viktor's office. "Where do you keep your envelopes?"

Viktor looks up, watching Jayce move carefully around the room on his crutches, before stepping over to a small cabinet where he pulls out a stack of unsealed envelopes. "Here," he says, and Jayce takes them with a nod, clearing off a portion of Viktor's table as he starts to settle in.

Viktor is still looking at him—plans for the College spread out before him—as Jayce begins to pen out his first letter, and he glances up only partially to meet Viktor's gaze.

"Are you keeping me company, now?" Viktor asks him, voice dry, and Jayce just shrugs, turning his attention back to his letter as Viktor clicks his tongue. The two of them work in relative silence for the next couple hours—the only notable noise being the ambient whirr of machinery that filters through the open door.

Jayce finds himself glancing up occasionally—out of the corner of his eye when he thinks Viktor won't notice—to study the other man. His mask is on, yet his posture changes often: stiff and rigid as he stares down at his plans, bent low over the table as he writes or rewrites something in one of his notebooks. Jayce doesn't let himself stare, but he finds his attention drifting often enough that he finishes his letters in slower time than he might have done, otherwise.

By the end of the morning, Jayce has a lengthy (and very apologetic) letter written to Amaranthine, as well as a nicely written note for Vi, asking her to look into what happened at the College. He writes out a short update to Clan Giopara, as well as a second, longer update for his parents, who had likely heard what happened, but would still be worried enough to want to hear from him. He begins to write out a final letter for the Academy, before staring down at the words he'd written—staring down at *Viktor's name*—and scrapping that letter entirely.

Jayce seals the letters one by one, before stacking them and holding them up to Viktor, who startles from his work and takes the letters a second later. Viktor flips through the names, pausing as he looks at Vi's, before returning to the same cabinet he was in before, and pulling out a set of stamps.

"I'll send them off tomorrow morning," Viktor says, dropping the stamped letters off on his smaller desk in the back, "if that's alright with you."

"That's fine," Jayce replies, stretching as he nods, his joints cracking as he presses his palms skyward.

As Viktor rounds back to the front of his worktable, he hums, turning a couple of his larger diagrams over Jayce's way. "What do you think?" he asks, pointing out a set of floor plans that span the paper. "They're based off of the building's original layout, with some optimizations for foot traffic and a larger atrium space."

Jayce looks down at them, giving something between a nod and a shrug as he reads through Viktor's plans, and he looks back up at Viktor a couple heartbeats later, lips pulled into a wry smile. "You seem surprisingly good at this, for someone who doesn't care much for architecture. I

don't think I could design a building for shit—even if I wanted to."

Viktor hums, waving away the compliment with his third hand. "I've been... reading up on civil engineering practices. And I've been working on my laboratory long enough to have gained at least some amount of structural design."

"Oh," Jayce says, raising his eyebrows. "Did you design this whole building, then?"

"Only parts of it," Viktor replies. "But I've made a variety of modifications to it, over time: small renovations to different wings, some repairs in others." Viktor looks down at Jayce pointedly, head cocking to the right, and Jayce's grin morphs awkwardly into a grimace, thinking back to a time when *repairs* might have been necessary.

"Ah," he replies, mouth drawn, "that makes sense."

Viktor looks at him a moment, before pulling back his floor plans and straightening up in his chair. "Do you want lunch?" he asks, and Jayce nods back.

"Yeah, that'd probably be good," he replies, and Viktor stands, gesturing for Jayce to follow suit.

"Then I think it's time you attempt the stairs, too," Viktor says, and Jayce snorts, before nodding again, gathering his crutches and following Viktor out the door.

The staircase up to Viktor's personal quarters is thin and winding, and Jayce climbs the stairs slowly, putting less weight on his augmented side than he has been over the past couple days. Viktor follows after him, slowly, and Jayce grits his teeth, trying not to feel too pressured to climb faster. Eventually, Jayce makes it up to the landing, noting that the floor has changed to dark hardwood and the halls are lined with small skylights.

"To the right," Viktor says, and so Jayce turns right.

The room they eventually enter into appears to be a small, lofted living room, with a dining area and open kitchen situated towards the back. There's another staircase against the far wall, leading up towards an additional floor that Jayce can only partially see the hallway of. The large, open wall has skylights towards the top, and a variety of gaslit lighting fixtures hang from the ceiling.

Viktor passes him, walking to the back of the room where the kitchen sits, and waves for Jayce to sit down.

"So this is your house?" Jayce asks, and Viktor nods.

"The staircase behind you leads up to my bedroom and personal study, and the hallway we passed through earlier leads out to Emberlift, as well as to a couple of my smaller workshops. Those are the ones I let most of the public see."

"It's nice," Jayce says, finally, as he looks around the room, and Viktor makes a noise, removing his mask and placing it across the table from Jayce.

"Thank you," he replies, mouth thinning into a smile. "I do like it here—quite a bit."

Jayce feels his heart flip as Viktor turns around, back to the kitchen, and Jayce sits back, heart beating quietly as he watches Viktor light the stove.

"Are you the one that's been cooking for me?" Jayce finds himself asking, as Viktor continues to move about the tiny kitchen.

“Of course,” Viktor replies, glancing over at him as he settles by the stovetop, one eyebrow raised. “Who else would it have been?”

Jayce doesn’t really have an answer other than, perhaps, “robots,” so he shrugs and lets Viktor turn back to the stove, where he begins heating water for rice. Jayce watches as Viktor cuts various vegetables and begins laying strips of meat into a pan, a couple of eggs following after. Smells of old and cooking meat fill the kitchen. Jayce continues to watch Viktor’s back as he tends to the pan, grinning as he watches the surprisingly hefty amount of work that Viktor's third arm contributes to the process.

It’s weirdly domestic, Jayce finds, watching Viktor cook for him—more than when Viktor simply brought meals down to his room—and the thought is an intriguing one that he tries not to dwell on. Neither of them had had to cook for themselves back in their Academy days—the dining halls and various restaurants spread through the district more than enough for the two of them—and cooking is a skill that Jayce wouldn't have expected Viktor to have. He hadn’t, after all, expected Viktor to still *need* to eat until very recently, what with Jayce not knowing how human Viktor’s face still remained, and Jayce absently wonders how much of Viktor's body really *is* robot now, and how much of it still isn’t.

Jayce closes the lid on that particular thought after a short, heated moment, eyes snapping away from Viktor’s working figure.

Eventually, Viktor finishes what he’s doing, and Jayce hears the gas turn off. Viktor steps over with his pan, doling out two large helpings of fried rice onto a set of plates. He returns the pan to his sink, picks up his mask with his third arm, and looks at Jayce expectantly.

“Back downstairs?” he asks, and Jayce grimaces at the staircase, but gets up with his crutches anyway, making his way down in front of Viktor, who holds their plates carefully behind him.

“How often do you use your kitchen table?” Jayce asks as he struggles down the stairs, one leg at a time.

“Never,” Viktor replies promptly, and Jayce sighs, his right hip burning with exertion as he gets to the bottom of the staircase. “Unless I have work I can do up there, which doesn’t happen often enough to be necessary.”

They make their back way to the office in Viktor’s workshop, and Jayce sits down with a sigh, leaning back in his chair and letting his legs stretch out in front of him. His metal leg strains, tired at the hip, and Viktor sets one of the plates down in front of him, a fork following shortly after.

“Water, or something else?” Viktor asks, and Jayce looks at him curiously.

“What else do you have?”

“Coffee,” Viktor replies, brow creasing. “And probably tea? I think I might have some sort of juice, somewhere, too.”

Jayce snorts. “Water is fine. I’ll have coffee tonight, if we’re up late again.”

Viktor nods and leaves to pour him a glass, then sets that in front of Jayce, too. Jayce eats in silence, reading through more of Viktor’s notes, and Viktor eats as he works—his mask set aside, carefully placed atop his desk at the far end of the room.

They stay that way for the rest of the afternoon, until the hour turns to evening, and evening turns to night.

“How about this?” Jayce asks, turning his notebook around a couple of days later, so that Viktor can see his sketches. They’re not the best, but Jayce thinks they at least get across what he wants them to, and Viktor makes a face as he reads through Jayce’s notations.

“It’s a bit gaudy,” Viktor says, slowly, and Jayce nods. He knows this, and he loves this. “It’s very... *classic Piltover*.”

Viktor sighs and Jayce grins, nodding again as he looks back down at the ideas he’d sketched up for his new set of limbs. They’re nothing special, lacking in heavy technical improvements to Viktor’s original designs, but Jayce finds he prefers them that way. After all, as cool as Viktor’s third arm—which, Viktor has shown him, doubles as a laser—is, Jayce would prefer to keep his prosthetics simple: functional, stylish, and a little less Zaunite.

“I suppose I could make you limbs like that,” Viktor says, “but it’ll take some time—you’ll likely be fully recovered before they’re even ready.”

“That’s fine,” Jayce replies, waving his hand, “I don’t mind waiting.”

“You’ll have to go through another pretty intense surgery and recovery process, too,” Viktor adds, and though Jayce’s response isn’t immediate this time, he still shrugs.

“I can deal with it—especially if I’m back in Piltover by then.”

Viktor snorts, picking up Jayce’s notebook as he sets down Jayce’s breakfast. “Alright then,” he says. “We can work on them in my free time.”

Jayce grins wider, unnecessarily pleased at the “we” included in that statement as he starts to eat. He can admit that it feels wonderful, working alongside Viktor like this again—exchanging ideas and trading quips—and Jayce eats his breakfast while Viktor reads through his sketches. He makes small comments on the things he would change, if Jayce would allow him to, and Jayce nods through Viktor’s ideas, rattling off his own opinions as he does.

The rest of the morning they spend in Viktor’s workshop, designing prototypes and discussing the progress that Viktor has made with the College. It’s comfortable and familiar, and Jayce has to sit down after a while: his body tired, and his back sore. Viktor smirks at him, and moves to work on his own projects as Jayce sits back and watches. He shows Jayce the designs he’s been commissioned to make by the members of Zaun’s upper echelon, and he walks Jayce through their functions and intended purposes. Jayce remembers a few of them from the times he’d read through Viktor’s notebooks—as well as from the first time he walked through the workshop alone—and he listens after Viktor’s various explanations, cutting in with his own commentary every now and then.

Viktor has Jayce attempt the stairs again, for dinner later that evening, and Jayce struggles up them just as terribly as he did the first time. They return to eat in Viktor’s workshop office once Viktor has finished cooking, and Jayce thinks they might be settling into a fairly comfortable routine of work, stair practice, and more work. The projects Jayce works on are less official than the contracts Viktor has to finish, but his handwriting has become more steady with the more he writes in his notebook, and he’s able to write for a more extended period of time than he was able to before. Jayce also does his best to help Viktor with his own work—providing commentary and design suggestions that he’s certain Viktor appreciates just as much as he finds annoying.

By the end of the day, Viktor has nearly finalized his plans for the remodeling of the College of

Techamturgy's upper levels. There are just a few more things that he wants to sleep on, and he says as such as he leans back in his chair—the workshop's candlelight framing his face.

Jayce watches him leisurely, from over his notebook, and as Viktor goes to take a sip from his cold cup of coffee, Jayce tilts his head and clears his throat.

"I'm sorry for not defending you," he says, "when Stanwick presented on Blitzcrank in your stead."

Viktor stiffens in his seat, glancing over at Jayce as he sets down his coffee, and Jayce stares back at him, heart beating evenly. It's a statement he's wanted to make for some time now, but the time had never felt right: he knows the topic of Blitzcrank had been important to Viktor—back when he'd left the Academy, when wounds of Stanwick's betrayal were still fairly raw—and it'd felt like too sensitive a topic for Jayce to bring up simply during their meals, or over their semi-nightly games of Tak.

"It's in the past, now," Viktor says, after a moment, "though I'll admit... I've always been confused as to why you didn't."

"I don't have a good excuse," Jayce replies, easily, and Viktor takes another sip of coffee. "I just remember being upset about the arguments we were having at the time, and I suppose—well—I suppose I was rather petty when I was younger, wasn't I?"

Viktor hums. "I suppose you were," he agrees, looking critically back at Jayce.

"But still—" Jayce continues, "I've thought about it a fair amount since then, and I just want you to know that I'm sorry. I know how much your work with Blitzcrank meant to you."

"It was a long time ago," Viktor says, sighing, "but thank you. I appreciate that. Blitzcrank does mean a lot to me, and I'm still quite proud of them now. More so, perhaps, than I am of most of my other work these days."

Viktor gestures off at the various commissioned tech that lies around his office, and Jayce snorts.

"Have you seen them at all, recently?" Jayce asks, tipping them both into territory he knows Viktor will appreciate, and Viktor huffs, a soft smile slowly settling upon his face.

They spend the rest of the night sidetracked—the Tak game they were intending to play forgotten—discussing Blitzcrank and the work that Viktor put into his research. Jayce leans forward, pleased by the pride that drips from Viktor's voice even as he works to even out the intonations of his words.

Jayce knows why he hadn't stood up for Viktor back then, and even after their falling out, Jayce knew he'd regretted it. He'd been selfish and competitive when he was younger, far more so than he is now, and he'd always been somewhat resentful of Viktor and his easy genius—just as much as he'd admired him for it. He'd accepted Stanwick's presentation, brushing off Viktor's complaints even after he'd brought proof to the Professors, and—in doing so—Jayce had worked to widen the rift that had been growing between the two of them already.

Jayce looks back on his Academy days fondly, yet he knows they weren't perfect. He'd been arrogant and rude to everyone, including Viktor and his professors, and he's had to face that fact over the past few years. He thinks he may have gotten better—the other members of Clan Giopara will work with him now, if minimally, and Viktor hasn't yet thrown him out of his workshop—and Jayce attributes that to time and his steadily increasing age. He knows he's just as arrogant as ever,

but he's learned to pick out his words in a way that better suits his needs, and if he's managed to offend fewer people while doing so, well—he considers that a bonus.

And yet, his broken relationship with Viktor had weighed on him for years, even after Viktor had been cast out of Piltover's scientific community and had returned to his home in Zaun. They'd been friends at the Academy, as close of friends as Jayce had allowed them to be, and Jayce would say that Viktor was, perhaps, one of the only individuals that he'd respected back then. Despite that, however, as their arguments on morality, logic, and the nature of being human persisted, Jayce knows that he'd only fed into the rift that had formed between the two of them, and in the end he'd refused—out of annoyance, stupidity, or, perhaps, stubbornness—to reach back across.

He regrets it, a little bit. Especially now—knowing how easily the two of them fell back into their pattern of living and working together. In some ways, he feels as though nothing has changed, and in others—as when Viktor refits his mask upon his face, eyes hard as he bids Jayce goodnight—things feel more different than ever. The two of them are older, and the misunderstandings that had stood between the two of them before have slowly been ironed out over Jayce's time in the lab: talked about, addressed, apologized for, argued over.

Jayce finds himself working to understand Viktor more than he's ever done in the past, and Viktor—in turn—is allowing himself, slowly, to be understood.

Jayce repeats that thought, and finds that he likes it.

He likes this—likes *Viktor*—and that's the thought that he settles upon as he makes his way back to his bedroom, later that night, after Viktor has turned to step up the staircase to his own.

He likes Viktor, and he thinks that he probably always has.

It's a fact that feels as simple and ingrained as the physical laws of the universe—gravity, magnetism, the push and pull of force—it's just that this force (the one that Jayce feels drawing him in, closer and closer to the individual that is *Viktor*) has never been quite as clear to him.

Chapter 5

Chapter Notes

Apologies for the lateness, but hey—we're very close to the end. Please enjoy!

"So, do you just not eat breakfast?" Jayce asks Viktor the next morning, as Viktor brings him breakfast in bed once again.

Viktor sits down in his usual chair and shakes his head. "Not usually, no. But when I do, I typically eat before bringing your own food down to you."

Viktor pulls out his notebook—beginning to work as Jayce begins to eat—and Jayce frowns through his food, watching Viktor carefully.

"Did you eat today?"

"No, I didn't," Viktor replies, absently, not looking up, "but I'm not hungry yet."

Jayce continues eating the oatmeal that Viktor brought him—the oatmeal that Viktor made, solely for him—and makes a sudden decision. "I think," he says, carefully, "that I might come upstairs to eat my breakfast tomorrow, if that's alright with you."

Viktor glances up at him, one eyebrow raised, and Jayce continues. "Your kitchen table deserves more use than it gets. And anyway—I'm supposed to be practicing the stairs, aren't I?"

Jayce grimaces as he says it, not overly pleased by the thought, and Viktor snorts out a laugh before returning to his notebook.

"Mm, alright," he replies. "I wouldn't mind. After all—if you're willing to brave the stairs just to make sure that I eat breakfast, then I suppose I can live with that."

Jayce feels a grin pull at the edges of his lips, and he finishes his oatmeal quietly while Viktor continues taking notes.

Once Jayce has finished, Viktor asks him to do his joint exercises, and Viktor watches as he runs through them—asking after pain points and noting down Jayce's responses in a different, smaller notebook.

"Do you mind," Viktor asks him carefully, once he's finished, "if I touch—?"

He gestures down at Jayce's arm, and Jayce blinks up at him, then shakes his head. Viktor steps closer, hands lifting Jayce's arm, and he turns the prosthetic under the light of the room, feeling the movement of Jayce's elbow and wrist as he hinges them back and forth. Viktor presses his fingers against the place where metal meets flesh—high up on Jayce's torso, and Jayce looks away, trying not to focus on Vitkor's hands more than necessary.

Viktor pulls out a couple tools, and Jayce can feel him tightening some of the connections on his arm—small screws replaced and chafed connections oiled. Viktor steps back after a moment, wiping the excess oil from his hands onto his pants, and he waves his hand towards Jayce's arm.

“Go through your exercises again,” he says, and Jayce nods, going through the motions and letting Viktor make any additional fixes that he deems fit.

“Alright,” Viktor says finally, stepping back a second time. “That should be good enough for your arm. May I do your leg, now, too?”

Jayce nods again, before doing his best to turn his brain off completely for the rest of their session. He stares, resolutely, at the back wall of his room as Viktor moves his ankle, his knee, his leg at the hip—and feels as though he should have had the foresight not to let Viktor get this close. Viktor is careful with him—his hands firm and deliberate as they work Jayce’s metal body—and Jayce’s gaze keeps returning to Viktor’s tall, thin frame, hair falling into his face as he kneels down to tighten one of the screws near Jayce’s ankle.

Viktor has always been attractive while he’s focused, Jayce can admit that much—after all, it wasn’t like he was blind to the other man’s charms during their Academy days—but things feel different now that he’s acknowledged his interest in the other man. He’s more conscious of it—cognizant of Viktor’s dark eyes as they flick up to meet his, and Jayce smiles back—small and easily—before looking away and feeling like his heart is two seconds away from beating its way out of his chest.

Jayce isn’t unaccustomed, per say, to attraction; yet intimacy has never been something he’s prioritized in his life, and he figures that the same is likely true for Viktor, as well. It’s a strange realization, and Jayce remains quiet as Viktor finishes his work—oiling parts of Jayce’s leg as Jayce straightens it back down onto the bed.

“Let me know how your limbs feel by the end of today,” Viktor says, as he stands, wiping excess oil off his hands again. He holds one hand out for Jayce to take, and Jayce allows himself to be pulled up onto his feet, Viktor’s hand steading him as he reaches for his crutches.

“When do you think I’ll be off these?” Jayce says, glancing down at the crutches as he settles them back under his arms.

“Likely soon,” Viktor replies, nodding at Jayce to follow him out of the room. “I’ll have a cane for you then, just in case.”

“A cane,” Jayce grimaces, quietly, “will make me feel far older than I am.”

Viktor makes a soft grunt. “You are old. And you’ll be thankful for it, as you ease off using your crutches.”

Jayce sighs, following Viktor into the workshop as Viktor rolls up his sleeves.

“Fine, fine,” he grunts, “as long as it looks a bit nicer than these crutches do, then I won’t complain.”

They enter Vitkor’s office and Viktor motions him over to the table. Spread out are the nearly finalized plans for the College—all of Viktor’s notebooks in the same places they were last night—and Jayce settles into his chair as Viktor gets to work. The day passes quickly—similarly, Jayce thinks, to the past couple of days—and when Viktor finally finishes his designs, the plans signed and dated at the bottom, it’s already dark.

“I believe I’m done,” Viktor says, voice soft as he does so, and Jayce looks up, leaning forward to see what Viktor has added and changed. Viktor pushes himself out of his seat while Jayce looks over his work, and comes back a moment later with a glass of water.

He drinks quietly as Jayce continues to read.

“It looks good to me,” Jayce finally says, nodding slowly. “I wish you would have edited this bit though—larger windows would have brought more light into the corridors. I really do hate how so many of your buildings here have such tiny windows.”

“Your opinion has been noted,” Viktor says, stepping up to him and setting his glass down on the table, “and dismissed.”

Jayce huffs a laugh as Viktor goes to organize his notebooks: stacking the plans on top of each other and setting them down atop the desk in the back.

“Happy to have finished?” Jayce asks, once Viktor has stepped back to him, and Viktor gives him a look.

“Relieved, perhaps,” he responds, and Jayce shrugs, still smiling. “It’s possible they’ll want me to make edits, but I think I’ll leave it to the Professors to make any additional changes. I’m afraid I’m quite ready to be rid of these building plans. It will be nice to work on something else.”

“Makes sense,” Jayce replies, voice light. “Want to work on a game of Tak before bed, then? It’s been a little while since we last played.”

Viktor thinks for a moment, then nods, a ghost of a smile breaching his face. “Alright. If you’re so intent to lose to me once again, then I suppose I can spare some time before we sleep.”

Jayce snorts, but doesn’t say anything else as they stand up to retrieve the game. As they walk, Viktor asks if Jayce would want to play up in his living room—where he has, in his own words, “more comfortable chairs than those in his office, or down in Jayce’s room”—and Jayce accepts, wondering if it isn’t simply a way to get him practicing the stairs even more than he has.

They settle in Viktor’s living room, where the plush—and likely fairly unused—chairs and sofas are indeed more comfortable than the one that Jayce had been using in the office. They play a couple games well into the night, and by the end of them Jayce is tired and quietly content, and he doesn’t even complain when Viktor walks him down the stairs at the end of the night: “just to make sure he doesn’t fall.”

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Nightly Tak games become more of a routine after that—instead of just an on and off practice between the two of them. The games become just as ingrained in Jayce’s life as the rest of their small habits do, and Jayce finds himself settling into a slow rhythm as he waits for his body to fully recover. He eats with Viktor upstairs, and they descend to the machine shop’s office to work—Viktor finishing up his commissioned augments, and Jayce either staying to work on his penmanship or going down to explore the bottom levels of Viktor’s lab—until late into the evening. After that, Viktor will typically make them some sort of dinner, and then they’ll retire to sit in Viktor’s living room: finishing the evening with a couple rounds of Tak.

Jayce can feel his body getting stronger with the increased amount of effort he puts into climbing the stairs and walking through the lowermost levels of the lab, and he thinks, perhaps, that it’ll soon be time for him to return to Piltover.

The thought leaves him excited—as well as mildly anxious. He hasn’t talked to Viktor about leaving, not since the day he’d decided to stay with Viktor for the remainder of his recovery, and Jayce wonders what their relationship will look like once he leaves.

Will they remain friends? Visit each other, write?

Will Jayce try to court him, like that small part of him so desperately wants to? And would Viktor—this new Viktor who enjoys Jayce's company and cooks for them both in his tiny, upstairs kitchen—even want him to?

They're simple questions—ones that Jayce is fairly sure he already knows his own answers to—but Jayce pushes them aside, trying not to dwell. After all, he's still on crutches now, and he won't need to push for any of those answers for a little while longer.

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"Good morning," Viktor greets, as Jayce slips into a seat at Viktor's kitchen table. Jayce nods at him, murmuring his own quiet "good morning" and sighs as he rests his crutches up against the edge of the table. His right side feels significantly stronger now—the stairs not nearly as much of an issue as they were before—and he finds that he's able to take steady steps around his room, without the aid of crutches, for a long enough periods of time that Jayce is fairly sure he'll be finishing his recovery soon.

Jayce voices his thoughts, and Viktor nods, setting breakfast down in front of them both. Before he sits down, however, he walks to the center of the living room, where he pulls a parcel over and sets it down next to Jayce on the table.

"I thought you'd be ready to try a cane out soon, so I sent for this. It's from Piltover, so hopefully the aesthetic is more to your liking," he says, and Jayce pushes his bowl aside to unwrap the parcel—a thin, gold and copper plated cane falling into his hands.

It's simple, but Jayce thinks it's stylish enough, and he grins, testing it against the floor. "Definitely more to my liking," he says, "I'll try it out after I eat."

Viktor nods and settles into his own seat, pulling his bowl closer to him. They eat quietly as Jayce admires the make of his cane, and a moment later, Viktor taps the iron tabletop with his finger, drawing Jayce's attention back to his face.

"I plan to bring the plans to the College later today," Viktor says, carefully. "It will be a long trip, with a decent amount of walking, but we're welcome to join me. If you'd like to."

Jayce nods, swallowing his bite as Viktor looks out over the table at him. "Sure," Jayce replies, easily, "especially if I can use the cane, instead of the crutches."

Viktor nods, and once they've finished eating, he gathers up their bowls and moves them to the sink. Jayce stands up, and he leans against the table, before shifting his weight, carefully, onto the cane.

It feels awkward, putting as much weight into his arm as he finds that he needs to, but Jayce shifts his banace around, getting accustomed to the feel of it, before leaning heavily on the cane as he begins to walk around the room.

"I feel like I'm hobbling around," Jayce says, as Viktor finishes with the dishes and steps back up to him.

"You are," Viktor replies, snorting, before taking his arm and walking with him towards the stairs.

Viktor spends the next hour or so helping Jayce get used to walking with his cane, and Jayce makes his way up and down the stairs between the laboratory and Viktor's living room far more

times than he'd originally intended.

"Do you feel comfortable enough to join me at the College, today?" Viktor asks him, and Jayce nods, excited. He sits on one of the couches, stretching his limbs, while Viktor leaves to get his coat.

It's the same heavy leather overcoat that Jayce saw him in last time he left for the College, and Viktor fits his mask back over his face as he steps down the stairs, pushing his hair back against his head. Viktor walks over to where Jayce sits, and when Jayce starts to stand up, Viktor looks him over and clicks his tongue.

"Hm. I'd almost forgotten," Viktor murmurs. "I assume you'll want nicer clothes?"

Jayce frowns down at the loose-fitted patient wear that Viktor had given him multiple sets of so many nights before, and he nods, his frown morphing into a grimace.

"Yes," he replies, "please."

Viktor turns to walk back up the stairs, and descends from his bedroom a couple moments later: a variety of clothing items clutched in his arms. He drops the clothes unceremoniously onto one of the plush couches, and gestures towards it as Jayce walks up to him. "Take your pick," he says, and Jayce finds a nice set of trousers and a collared shirt that look to be about his size, before making his way to the bathroom that Viktor points him towards.

"I'll put the rest in your room, if you want them?" Viktor asks, and Jayce lets him know that he does, before shutting himself inside the bathroom and struggling to get himself changed. It's the first time he's worn something more than the loose clothing that Viktor had provided him with at the start of his stay, and it feels strange, pulling the thick fabric of the trousers up and over his metal leg. The collared shirt fits well enough, and he tucks the tail ends of his shirt under the seam of his trousers, unbuttoning the top couple of buttons and turning around in the mirror.

He doesn't look half bad—certainly better than he has in the past couple of weeks—and he resolves to ask Viktor for a belt before they leave.

He returns to the living room to find Viktor already there, plans clutched in his hands, and when Jayce asks him for a belt, Viktor stares at him for a long moment before noting that he'll also find Jayce a better pair of shoes.

They leave not long after, Viktor leading him past his usual staircase and out towards the front of his home—the side that sits upon Emberlift Alley.

Jayce grimaces as they step out, the clean air inside Viktor's house turning muddy as Jayce steps outside, and Viktor walks with him slowly, leading him down the alley and onto the main street. They take a long train ride north, with Viktor quiet and stoic as the denizens of Zaun's Entresol level filter in and about around them.

Jayce frowns, shifting closer to Viktor as people step close to them, sit next to them, *smile* at them —and he realizes, suddenly, that it's been a very long time since he last interacted with someone other than Viktor. He'd almost forgotten what it's like to be around other people, and Jayce can't say he's all too happy to have been reintroduced to the experience.

Viktor speaks quietly to him as they pass through different areas of Zaun, and Jayce figures that this is the first time he's visited the city for purposes other than work. The Entresol layer of Zaun is nice enough, though perhaps more crowded than Jayce would have liked, and the architecture—

all wrought iron and tall, arching windows—curve up around their train. Jayce finds the stillness of the buildings fascinating. Gas and various types of chemical expulsion pour out from the sides of factory buildings, and Jayce makes a game of trying to differentiate the residential buildings from the industrial ones.

Eventually, they make it to a stop where Viktor stands, and they—alongside a variety of other Zaunite individuals—spill from the train and walk towards a large, dark building that extends, seemingly infinitely, up towards the sky.

"One of the few access points to the Promenade Level," Viktor says, as Jayce stares up at the giant ticking clock that sits against the side of the elevator building's face. "The rest of the elevators around here stay mostly within the bounds of Entresol."

Jayce nods, and Viktor takes him through the gates of the building, where he buys them a set of tickets, and they file into a large atrium room where others mill about, all waiting for their elevators to come. The people inside the atrium look mildly more sophisticated than the people Jayce observed on their train, and Jayce notes the large variety in augmented body parts that he can see throughout the room. He's surprised to find that he doesn't feel out of place at all, what with his metal arm exposed, and so Jayce rolls up his sleeves while he waits, Viktor standing impatiently next to him.

The ride up to the Promenade Level is much shorter than the train ride was, and Jayce pushes himself over to the window-facing side of the elevator so that he can see the buildings of the Entresol level pass by. Viktor snorts, coming up behind him a second later, and together they watch the city pass, levels upon levels of Zaun sinking deeper into the expanse of city below them.

The Promenade Level is nicer than Entresol—though the architecture feels more or less the same—and Jayce breathes easier as they make their way to the College's streets. They take another train, and Jayce is glad to be sitting again, at least for a short period of time.

"How are you holding up?" Viktor asks him, as Jayce sighs and sinks back into his seat. The whirr of machinery is loud enough that Jayce can barely hear him, but Jayce inclines his head, sitting back up as a stranger sits to the other side of him. "Does your cane work alright?"

"It's fine," Jayce replies, smiling slightly, and Viktor hums, the noise drowned out by the din of the train as they finally reach their destination.

The College is similar to how Jayce remembers it—its multiple buildings spanning many sub-levels of the Promenade. The wing that Jayce had been working in before the explosions went off is nearly completely destroyed, in addition to other locations down the street, and Viktor points out all the areas that he had been asked to redesign. Jayce is able to fit Viktor's floor plans and early isometric sketches well enough onto the sides of the College, and he grins, suddenly very excited to see what it'll look like once complete.

Viktor leads him through the large College atrium and down a variety of winding halls—halls that Jayce, only vaguely, remembers walking through before—and Jayce realizes they're heading towards the upper levels, where the various offices and living quarters of the Headmasters reside.

"This shouldn't take long," Viktor says, as they ascend within yet another elevator. "We'll just be dropping off the plans today, and the Professors will get back to me with their intended changes later this week."

They make it down the hall and Viktor turns a couple corners before knocking on a large, metal door that Jayce wouldn't have been able to tell apart from the others—if not for the small metal

plate inscribed with the name *Wildak.*

“You two may know each other already,” Viktor says, as an old, greying man who Jayce doesn’t really recognize opens the door, “but Jayce, this is Professor Wildak—he works with Professor Mardove in golem and automation tech. Wildak, this is Jayce Giopara, he was one of the academics visiting from Piltover when the explosions took place.”

“Well,” Wildak says, voice low and amused as his eyes move from Viktor’s face to Jayce’s, “it’s nice to see you again, too, Viktor.”

He moves to shake Jayce’s hand, and Jayce notices that although his hands are still human, his arms from the elbows all the way to his upper back appear to be fully metal, his movements enhanced. Roboticized.

“I remember seeing you,” Jayce says, nodding, and Wildak nods as well, blinking back.

“I’m sorry to hear about your body,” he says, and Jayce stiffens, uncomfortable as Wildak raises his arm to look closer at Jayce’s metal hand. “Viktor told me about it the last time he was here—terrible incident, but I’m glad to see you’re back in action.”

Viktor stiffens, too, as Jayce looks over at him, and the Professor waves them both inside his office a moment later. Viktor walks in, nodding to a younger woman who sits at a desk along the far back wall, and he pulls out the plans from inside his coat. Jayce figures the woman must be Professor Mardove, and Jayce nods to her as well while Wildak ushers them into seats on his side of the office space.

“Here are my proposed plans for the remodel,” Viktor says, handing Wildak the sheets, “and a letter for the Headmasters, detailing my intentions with it.”

Viktor doesn’t sit down, so neither does Jayce, but Wildak doesn’t seem to mind, taking the plants from Viktor’s hands and spreading them out onto his desk.

“Ah,” Wildak murmurs, eyes darting over Viktor's work, “lovely. I’ll bring these to the attention of the other Professors later today, and we’ll get back to you if our architects want to make any major changes. Mardove, come look—”

Jayce watches as Professor Mardove walks over, mechanical legs snapping against the floor as she walks, and Viktor shifts over to make room for her, allowing the two of them to discuss his plans as he turns back towards Jayce, his posture weary. Jayce wishes he could see Viktor’s face right now, but doesn’t dare ask him to remove his mask in the presence of the two Professors.

“Do you want lunch, after this?” Viktor asks mildly, and Jayce hums.

“Here, in the Promenade?” he replies, and Viktor nods back. Jayce doesn’t have a chance to reply before the two Professors turn their attention back to Viktor, and Jayce grins slightly as the other man gets pulled into their conversation. He listens as Viktor explains his design choices—Wildak and Mardove occasionally jumping in with additional comments and questions—and eventually, Jayce sits down in the chair Wildak had originally offered to him, watching as Viktor converses with the other two individuals.

Jayce knows he could jump into the conversation too—if he wanted to—simply due to how much involvement he’d had during the creation of the plans; and yet, he finds himself content to sit, rest his legs, and watch as Viktor does his best to keep up with the Professors’ neverending questions. Their discussion moves steadily further from the architecture and closer to Viktor’s personal work

with his automatons and automation tech, and Jayce wants to laugh as Viktor begins to get more invested in the conversation, his back straightening further as he speaks.

It's some time later that Viktor finally extracts himself from them, and Jayce gets up from his seat, using his cane to help himself stand, once Viktor starts bidding his goodbyes.

"You know, Viktor," Wildak says, side-eying the man as he shuffles the remodeling plans back into order and tucks them under his arm. "There's still a nice tenured position open here—in automated tech, no less—in case you might be interested?"

"I'll certainly consider it," Viktor replies, politely, and Jayce gets an immediate feeling that this is a common final thread in conversations between the two of them.

Wildak sighs, and Mardove laughs lightly as she returns to her side of the office.

"Just remember that we could always use a mind like yours, teaching here," he says, primly, as he leads them to the door. "And I'm sure the students would love you."

"I highly doubt they would," Viktor replies, shortly, and Jayce doesn't even bother to hide his snort, his eyes darting away from the Professor's amused, yet still slightly crestfallen face.

"But before we go," Viktor says, once they've made it safely back into the hallway, "I did want to ask—how are the investigations going? Have there been any new developments since I was last here?"

Wildak shakes his head, but Jayce doesn't think he looks as upset as he might.

"No, unfortunately," Wildak says, "but I'm sure we'll find out more, soon. Baron Lenare has been a big help with funding and has sent much support our way in the past week, and we've even received help from a couple ladies that were sent in from Piltover; they arrived just the other night."

"Oh—" Jayce exclaims, his voice rough as he realizes that exclamation is the first thing he's said in the past hour. Viktor sighs beside him, and Jayce glances at him once, before looking back to Wildak's face. "The short Sheriff and a pink haired woman with giant gauntlets, by any chance?"

Wilfred nods, and Jayce grins back. "Wonderful," he says, "I know them—they're both great people. I'm certain they'll be able to track down whoever did this."

"Lovely to hear, lovely indeed—" Wildak says. "If you're interested in saying hello before you go, I might know where they are now, and I can have one of the other Professors take you down."

Jayce looks to Viktor who, very reluctantly, nods his own approval, and Jayce is more than happy to delay lunch a little longer, for this. He says as much while Wildak flags down one of the associate Professors—an individual who introduces herself as Avis—to bring them down to Caitlyn and Vi's makeshift office.

Viktor hums, making small talk with the Professor Avis as they go, and Jayce listens, occasionally cutting in with his own remarks—"there's a professor here named *Higglebottom?*" and "that sounds mildly illegal"—as Avis takes them down the hall. She knocks once on the door they stop at, and Jayce pushes his way inside, a wide grin on his face as he does so.

Vi and Caitlyn are—delightedly—present inside the room, and Vi looks up from where she's lounging on a tiny couch, various papers sliding off her person as she pushes herself up into a sitting position, grinning back at Jayce.

“Vi, Caitlyn—” Jayce says, nodding to them both as he enters, “it’s good to see you both.”

“Damn, Jayce—are you using a cane?” Vi says, by way of greeting, laughing she rises and pulls Jayce into a short hug. “Hah—you really are an old man, now.”

Jayce grimaces as she steps back, and he lets Caitlyn plant a quick kiss on his cheek, leaning down to give her access.

“It’s good to see that you’re doing alright,” Caitlyn says as she pulls back, her eyes darting carefully over his prosthetic arm. “Vi was worried about you, after we received your last letter.”

Jayce waves away their concerns, letting them catch him up on the things he’s missed while down in Zaun and asking after their work in the College’s investigation. They chat amiably for a few minutes, before Jayce remembers Viktor again, and turns to find him still hovering awkwardly by the door. Jayce inclines his head, and Viktor steps over quietly, taking a place next to Jayce as both Caitlyn and Vi turn his way.

“Viktor, this is Vi and Caitlyn, two officers from Piltover’s police force. I do work on Vi’s gauntlets sometimes,” Jayce says, gesturing over to a pair of giant gauntlets that sit in the corner of the room, “and they’re good friends of mind. Vi, Cailtyn, this is Viktor, a old friend of mine from the Academy.”

“Viktor—” Caitlyn says, the name dripping with recognition on her tongue. She steps up and eyes him—up and down and back up again—as she sticks out one small, gloved hand. “A pleasure to meet you.”

“Sheriff,” Viktor nods, taking her hand in his, “the same.” He moves to shake Vi’s hand next, and Vi looks over him carefully before glancing back at Jayce and smirking, somewhat cheekily.

“We’ve certainly heard about you,” Vi says, and Jayce sighs, knocking at her leg with his cane. “Jayce has told us a lot about how you tried to kill him a few years ago—something about a crystal, no? Bit funny how life shakes out.”

“Truly, it is,” Viktor replies, voice clipped as he pulls his hand away, and Vi laughs, turning away from him to chat with Jayce a bit more before they leave.

Jayce tries to keep their meeting short—shorter, at least, than Viktor’s discussion with the Professors—and after Viktor has given Caitlyn as much information on Jayce’s injury and the aftermath of the explosion as he can, the two of them leave: stepping back out into the hallway and making their way out of the College of Techmaturgy’s main building.

Jayce finds himself happy to have gotten a chance to speak with them, happy to have been able to catch up, however briefly, and he’d promised to catch up longer with them once he’s made it back up to Piltover (and once their investigation is complete). Viktor is quiet as they make their way down the College’s elevators, and as they step out into the streets of Zaun, he turns and levels Jayce with a look.

“Were those your ‘connections’ to the Piltover police, then?” he asks, and Jayce nods, a small smile tugging at his face.

“I did tell you they’d be willing to help if I asked,” Jayce replies, and Viktor sighs, walking down the street and letting Jayce follow him.

“You shouldn’t have to ask, in the first place,” he says, “but I suppose I should thank you, still. They seem capable enough, and I feel better knowing that things are not solely in the hands of the

Professors and Baron Lenare."

Viktor leads him down the street to a small, overpriced looking cafe that sits along the College's boulevard, and he gestures inside as they stop. "Lunch, finally?" he asks, and Jayce nods, holding the door open as Viktor sweeps his way inside.

It's more of a late lunch-early dinner at this point, Jayce thinks, but Viktor asks their host for a small booth in the back, and Jayce watches his back as they sit down at a tiny iron table together. Viktor removes his mask discreetly and orders coffee for the both of them, then names some of the items that he'd liked best when he'd stopped here before—his wrist brushing against Jayce's as he leans over to point them out.

In the end, Jayce picks a sandwich that sounds interesting and normal, and Viktor himself orders some sort of pasta dish that he claims he's never tried before.

They chat about small things as they eat, both of them somewhat drained from the amount of social interaction that they'd taken part in throughout the day, and Jayce watches Viktor's lips move as he

talks, watches the way his hands wave when he complains about how desperately the Professors at the College have tried to recruit him in the past. Their meal at the cafe is less private than their usual meals in Viktor's lab, yet Jayce finds himself enjoying the atmosphere of it: the warm glow of the lanterns that light up the room as soon as the sky outside starts to darken, and the way that glow seems to shine off Viktor's eyes whenever their gazes meet.

Is this what attraction feels like? Jayce asks himself. *Is this what it feels like to become cognizant of your attraction to another person?*

Jayce doesn't have an answer, but Viktor smiles at him more times that evening than it feels like he has in years, and Jayce finds himself smiling back.

If the world revolves around Jayce, and someone else becomes his world, then where does that leave them? Viktor orbiting him, when it's much more accurate to say that Jayce is the one orbiting him?

It feels as though he's fallen—quick, far too quick—to even realize that he'd been falling in the first place, but if Jayce is being completely honest, he thinks that he may have actually fallen, quite some time ago, and his brain is only now catching up.

Is it possible to fall for someone so deeply without even realizing you had? It's an overly sentimental thought. Overly romantic. Jayce has never considered himself a romantic, yet he can't help the thoughts that bubble up as Viktor pays for their meal; can't help the warmth that spreads through his chest as Viktor helps him stand and leads them both outside.

The trip back to Viktor's laboratory feels shorter than it did on their way from it, and Jayce watches the bright lights of Zaun illuminate Viktor's face as their train passes through the upper levels of the city. He hasn't bothered to put his mask back on, and—for all intents and purposes—Viktor looks fully human again, with his metal body mostly disguised by the large overcoat that reaches for the floor. He looks like an older version of his former Academy self, and Jayce almost reaches out—in the middle of the small, nearly empty train—to touch at Viktor's face again, the same way he did not two weeks prior.

They make it back to Viktor's home on Emberlift Alley late into the night, and Viktor lights the candles in the living room as they enter, flames licking up the walls and lighting up the open space, and he goes to put away his coat, resting his mask—as well as a small box of extra pastries, which he had ordered to-go from the Promenade cafe—light upon the kitchen table.

Jayce hovers by the stairwell down to the rest of the laboratory, watching the other man as he moves, before walking up to the kitchen table, one hand coming up to rest upon the iron tabletop.

"Thank you for the cane, and for dinner," Jayce says, and Viktor looks back at him, eyes soft. "Are you planning to sleep, or would you like to play a game of Tak before bed?"

"A game is fine," Viktor says, nodding. "But I'm going to make myself sweetmilk, first. Do you want any?"

Jayce nods, and the two of them settle into their respective chairs a couple of minutes later, the game board spread out in front of them. They play a game, then another, and Jayce sips at the warm, anise-flavoured milk that Viktor has made for him, feeling the comfort of it reach his bones. He'd made sweetmilk for them both occasionally: back when they were at the Academy, and when drinking coffee felt like too bad of a decision to make. He's always liked it well enough, but not as much as Viktor had, and it seems that some habits never change.

The hour is far too late when they finally decide to call it a night, but Jayce doesn't mind, simply enjoying being present with Viktor, here and now. He moves to bring both of their cups to the sink, filling them both with water to soak, and steps back to where Viktor still sits, putting away their Tak set with long, calloused fingers.

"Will you need help getting back to your room?" Viktor asks him quietly, as Jayce sits down to help him finish.

"No," Jayce finds himself replying, a wry smile on his face as he stands from his seat once more—joints cracking with the movement. "I should be fine. Don't trouble yourself; I can walk much better now than I could before."

"Alright," Viktor says, eyes crinkling as he looks up to meet Jayce's gaze. "Goodnight, Jayce. Thank you, again, for joining me today."

Time grows slow as Jayce stares down at Viktor, the man that sits in front of him—whose bright eyes hold themselves quietly against Jayce's own. Candlelight flickers against Viktor's face, warm and soft against the lines by his eyes, and Jayce breathes out, his heart beating loud around his ears as he does so.

They both have their share of differences, similarities, peculiarities; their own share of misunderstandings. Yet Jayce has come to realize that no matter how much Viktor has changed—no matter how much he *continues* to change—Jayce will be drawn to him still. Indeed, it's Jayce who circles around Viktor like a moon orbits its planet—wants to know him, intrinsically, just as desperately as one might strive to know oneself. And though Jayce doesn't know what that means for him, doesn't know that that might mean for *them*, he does know for certain that this—whatever *this* is, this thing that has grown between them over the past couple weeks and sits, small and simmering and bright, between the two of them now, under the candlelight of Viktor's living room in Zaun—is all he's ever wanted.

And so, Jayce stops thinking. He simply leans down, one hand settling light against Viktor's shoulder, and kisses him.

It's slow; it's quiet.

And, when Jayce finally pulls back—Viktor's eyes meeting his, a soft flush visible across Viktor's face in the low light of his living room—Jayce thinks that it might be perfect.

"Goodnight, Viktor," he says, and Viktor smiles, small and genuine, as he leaves to his room for the night.

Chapter 6

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Jayce wakes up the next morning, and sighs heavily into the open air.

He'd kissed Viktor last night. Impulsively, yet decisively, and Viktor had smiled up at him, afterward, yet had said nothing in response as he'd left.

Jayce doesn't want to think too heavily upon it, doesn't want to overthink it more than he needs to, but doubt still settles in his mind as he turns on his side, metal arm tucked beneath him. He acts without thinking sometimes—acting on instinct and relying on the gut feelings that his body provides—and last night had, certainly, been one of those times. And yet, without concrete confirmation as to whether or not his instincts had been correct, Jayce can't help but feel somewhat nervous.Viktor hadn't really had a chance to reciprocate—even if he'd wanted to—but it's still entirely possible that Jayce has been misunderstanding what this relationship of theirs has been building up to, and even the slightest possibility of that leaves him feeling—

Disappointed? Confused? Embarrassed?

Jayce grits his teeth, and pushes the feeling down. He hasn't even seen the man yet, hasn't talked to him since the previous night, and there's no reason for him to be feeling the way he does. And anyway, Jayce thinks—if he really did mess things up last night, then it's not as though he can't just *leave*. His right side has become more than strong enough to make the journey back up to Piltover, and there's little keeping him here anymore—little but Viktor himself.

Jayce lets that thought settle heavily in his mind, before swinging himself over the side of his bed and grabbing his cane as he leaves for Viktor's kitchen. He continues to repeat that thought to himself—*if he hates you now, then you can leave, if he hates you now, then you can leave*—as he climbs up the stairs.

"Good morning," Jayce says, as he makes it up into Viktor's living room. He slips into his usual chair and rests his cane against the table, and Viktor looks up from his own seat at the table, a large cup of coffee set down in front of him.

"Good morning," Viktor replies, quietly, eyes dark and face unreadable. "Coffee?"

Jayce nods, and Viktor stands up, walking to the kitchen to retrieve Jayce a cup. Jayce follows him with his eyes—trying not to read too heavily into the stiffness of Viktor's posture, the heaviness in his voice—and when Viktor walks back, coffee in hand, Jayce is still staring.

Viktor sets the cup down upon the table, yet doesn't let go—instead remaining right where he is, standing there in front of Jayce, and Jayce stares back up at him: his mind reeling as he tries to find something to say.

"You kissed me yesterday," Viktor says, and Jayce's brain short circuits, just a bit. Viktor is staring down at him still, his face curiously blank and his hand still gripping tight at the handle of the coffee cup he'd brought over for Jayce, and Jayce opens his mouth, then closes it again, then sighs.

"Yes, I did," he finally says, and Viktor nods.

“Do you regret it?” he asks, face still remarkably blank, and Jayce pauses for a moment, frowning slightly as he searches Viktor’s face.

“No, I don’t,” Jayce replies, just as slowly and quietly as he’d spoken before, and the admission feels heavy, weighty as it drops from his tongue.

Viktor watches him for a moment, lips thinning slightly, before he shakes his head, his face softening slightly. “Good,” he says, his voice almost surprised, even as the words slip past his lips, “I’m glad.”

He lets go of Jayce’s cup a second later, and Jayce thinks he might be stepping back—might be turning away from him, returning to his chair at the other side of the table—yet Viktor’s hand moves up to cup his face, metal hand pressing against Jayce’s cheek, and Jayce’s heart flips, sudden and erratic. Viktor leans down slowly, lips a slight pressure against his, before pulling back a moment later, taking part of Jayce’s smile with him.

“Good morning,” Viktor says again, lighter this time, and Jayce is suddenly, absolutely sure that things will be alright.

Jayce leans up and kisses Viktor again, tentative as he reaches out for the other man, and Viktor sighs into him, the taste of coffee transferring to Jayce’s tongue.

A couple minutes later, Viktor pulls back for the second time—nudging Jayce’s coffee closer to him, and unwinding himself, fully, from Jayce’s embrace. He makes his way back to his seat across the table, and Jayce watches him go, still smiling, as he begins to sip from his coffee.

“With the plans finished, I’d like to return to working on your prosthetics,” Viktor says, his voice even, and Jayce nods, coffee burning down his throat and distracting him from the memory of Viktor’s lips on his. “Before then, though—do you want breakfast? We still have the pastries from yesterday.”

“Mm, please,” Jayce replies, and Viktor nods, downing the rest of his coffee and heading back to the kitchen to get himself more. He brings back the box of pastries, too, and their day begins again—in much the same way that it has in all their days past—with breakfast and quiet conversation.

They work for the rest of the day in Viktor’s workshop, finalizing their prior prototypes for Jayce’s new prosthetics, and it feels almost as if nothing has changed. They still fit together and work together as well as they did before—the only difference being Jayce’s ability to steal kisses from Viktor whenever he feels like it—and by the end of the day, Jayce is happy to see his designs finally coming to fruition. They both agree that the actual metalwork and detailing shall be taken care of by Viktor—as Viktor still has years of experience over him, working with prosthetics and body augmentation tech—yet Jayce can’t help but hope that Viktor will allow him to be present for the process.

Jayce knows that he’ll need to head back to Piltover soon, yet he hopes that Viktor will allow him to visit every once in a while—if not to help, then simply just to see him. The other alternative would be Viktor visiting Jayce up in Piltover, which—the more Jayce thinks about it—is a bit of a delightful thought. It would be nice having Viktor back in Piltover, just like when they were together there before, and Jayce wonders, absently, whether Viktor would be willing to visit him there, again, provided Jayce asked him to.

He doesn’t think it’ll be a tall ask for him to make, given the fact that they are, for all intents and purposes, friends again; and even more than that—they’re kind of dating now, aren’t they?

Jayce grins.

Dating. That's a scary thought, one that feels almost… juvenile. And yet, well—isn't that the word for what they're doing now? Dating; going out; seeing each other?

Becoming romantically involved?

Jayce's grin turns towards a mild grimace. He's never been very good at this—has never needed to be—and he realizes, as the two of them are walking up the stairs to make dinner for the night, that they haven't really talked about it, have they?

Do they have to talk about this? It seems like something they should. After all, Jayce doesn't know what that future might end up looking like, what with him returning to Piltover, but he knows that he wants one—wants a future with Viktor, that is—and that thought is more than enough for him.

They cook in Viktor's kitchen, Jayce helping out as much as Viktor will allow him to, and they settle down together in the living room some time later—candles lit as they set up for another couple games of Tak. Viktor makes them both sweet milk, and Jayce sips his quietly, lounging back in his chair as they play.

"Can we talk?" he eventually asks, his words blunt, and Viktor looks up from their game board, a ghost of a smile upon his face as he stares back at Jayce.

"Have we not been, already?" Viktor replies, taking his turn and gesturing for Jayce to take his.

Jayce snorts, but brushes off the snark as he contemplates his next move.

"I've been thinking," Jayce begins, "about when I should return to Piltover."

Viktor hums. "And have you decided?"

"Not yet," Jayce admits, "but I know that I should go soon."

"*Should* go?" Viktor repeats, glancing up briefly at Jayce's face. "As opposed to *want* to?"

Jayce grimaces, both words spinning in his head as he finally takes his turn. "Perhaps *want*, in addition to *should*," he admits, "but either way—it will be strange to go back. Especially after staying with you for so long."

"Are you worried?" Viktor asks him, and Jayce just shrugs.

"Not overly so," he replies, sipping from his milk. "To be completely honest, my main concern is that it will be much harder to see you, once I've returned to my life in Piltover."

Viktor is silent for a moment, not looking up at Jayce's face, nor making any move to take his next turn. Eventually, he lets out a soft sigh, picking up his own sweet milk and taking a long, quiet sip.

"Indeed," Viktor finally says, "it will be harder for you to see me, once you've returned."

Viktor pauses again, taking his turn and letting his gaze drift upwards, towards Jayce. "Do you foresee that as an issue?"

Jayce shakes his head, and shrugs. "Just a hurdle," he says, "but not one that's impossible to overcome."

"There will be more hurdles than just the distance," Viktor tells him, eyes curiously bright, and

Jayce snorts.

“Between us?”

“Between who else?” Viktor replies, quick, and Jayce sighs. He’s heard more than enough rhetorical questions from Viktor for one night.

“Obviously there will be,” Jayce replies, taking his turn, and Viktor nods, slowly. “I don’t expect things to run perfectly from here on out, especially given our history.”

“And yet, you’d still like to try?” Viktor asks, softly, and Jayce nods.

“I think it would be worth it. To try.”

Viktor is silent for a moment longer, before asking, very carefully: “How necessary is it, Jayce?”

“How necessary is what?” Jayce asks, blinking up.

“For you to return to Piltover,” Viktor says, his gaze fixed upon the game board as he picks up one of his stones and takes the rest of his turn.

Jayce stares at him for a long moment, his mouth parting slightly. “Are you asking me to stay here?” he asks, words slow as they leave his mouth. “To stay here, in Zaun?”

Viktor finally looks up, his eyes clear and bright as they lock with Jayce’s own. “Would you want to?” Viktor replies, quietly, and Jayce’s eyes widen. Viktor holds his gaze, open and curious, and Jayce finds it difficult to look away.

No, he thinks but doesn’t quite say, *not in Zaun, not really*—but Viktor seems to see the answer in his eyes, sighing a second later and gesturing at Jayce to make his move.

“I didn’t think you would,” Viktor murmurs, “but that’s alright. I knew it to be a selfish request.”

Viktor glances up at him again, expectant of Jayce’s next move, yet Jayce doesn’t reach for his stones. Instead, he keeps staring at Viktor, his mind reeling. Does Viktor want him to stay? Does Viktor want him to stay here, in Zaun, with *him?* Traveling from city to city is one thing, but living together—truly committing to living together, without the excuse of injury—is another thing entirely. Jayce lets the prospect sit, mulling it over in his mind, and comes to the conclusion that if living together is anything like the strange, comfortable lifestyle that he’s settled into now, perhaps it wouldn’t be so bad.

And yet, Jayce knows he doesn’t want to live in Zaun—*couldn’t* live in Zaun. Not with the life that he’s made for himself—the life that he *loves* for himself—up in Piltover. Jayce wonders if Viktor would feel the same way: as closely tied to his life in Zaun as Jayce is to his life in Piltover. Would Viktor consider living in Piltover, again? Or would he reject the idea as heavily as Jayce rejects Zaun? Jayce wouldn’t know for sure, but, he supposes, there’s only one way for him to find out.

“Do you want me to stay?” Jayce asks, and Viktor sighs at the question.

“I’ll admit,” Viktor replies, slowly, “that a part of me no longer wants you to leave.”

“So, yes?” Jayce asks, pushing harder, and Viktor levels him with a look that makes Jayce flush, just a bit.

“Yes, *obviously*,” Viktor snorts. “But I understand your want to return, and I won’t push you to stay

when it's clear you don't want to."

Viktor gestures towards the board again, and Jayce moves one of his stacks at random, not thinking about the game at all as his mind continues to turn.

"I can't stay in Zaun," Jayce tells him, voice even, and Viktor nods, his eyes narrowing as he goes to make his own move.

"Yes," Viktor repeats, "as I said—I didn't think you would."

"But would you not," Jayce continues, carefully, "consider coming back with me to Piltover, instead?"

Viktor visibly starts, his hand hovering over the board. "Back to Piltover?" he asks, looking steadily back at Jayce.

"Obviously, I'd understand if you wouldn't want to," Jayce starts, "considering the fact that I don't love the idea of living in Zaun, but I think—I think it would work. I have a nice place, and, well—I've also got way more money than I know what to do with."

Jayce breaks off, smile crooked as he turns away from Viktor. "I've enjoyed living with you, too. And I think we work well together when we put in the effort to. So I wouldn't mind having you return with me to Piltover—not if it's something you'd be interested in, too."

"Huh," Viktor murmurs, eyes distant. "Returning to Piltover."

"I'd like it, if you did," Jayce admits, and Viktor's gaze snaps back to him, a thin frown settling on his face.

"The people here still need me," Viktor says, and Jayce knows at once that this is his biggest qualm—the one thing that would ever hold him back.

Jayce isn't surprised. Viktor's commitment to his ideals and his sense of duty to the people of Zaun will, in Jayce's mind, inevitably come before anything else in Viktor's life—just as they always have. It would be unthinkable for Viktor to leave them behind in favor of a comfortable life with Jayce up in Piltover, and Jayce smiles, tentatively excited as he leans closer to Viktor over the table.

"So we'll help them," Jayce replies. "Both of us. After all, it's not as though we couldn't continue your work from Piltover, right?"

Viktor blinks, a happy flush settling over his face. "You say 'we' as though you care," he says, and Jayce levels him with a look. He continues: "It won't be as convenient for me, working from the Upper City—you know that."

And Jayce grins, his eyes bright as he leans farther forward.

"But you'll have access to more resources," he says, "and I'll be there, to help you."

Viktor nods, staring back at him. "I suppose that's true. Do you really mean to help me with my work, then? Even if I was to go back to Piltover?"

"Of course," Jayce replies, frowning. "Why wouldn't I?"

"You haven't liked my methods in the past," Viktor says, slowly. "And I can't guarantee you'll

always like them in the future."

"Then we'll argue about it," Jayce says, waving away the words, "and we'll work to reach a compromise that both of us can live with."

"And if we can't reach that compromise?" Viktor presses.

"Then we'll argue more until we do," Jayce answers, matter-of-fact. Viktor starts to speak again, but Jayce cuts him off, voice steady. "I know things haven't worked out for us in the past, Viktor, and I know things didn't work out the last time you were in Piltover. But I'm willing to try this time—certainly harder than I did before—and I want to believe that you would, too."

Viktor's face crinkles into a small, exhausted smile. "I suppose I might be," he replies, quietly, "willing to try."

Jayce grins back at him, soft and happy, and Viktor shakes his head, a soft sigh escaping from his lips.

"I do love my lab, you know," he says, "and I don't intend to completely move out. I'll want to come back here when I need to, and I'll want to be able to conduct work from here whenever it makes more sense for me to do so."

"That's fine," Jayce says, half shrugging, "I wouldn't mind. I suppose I could stand to return here, too."

Viktor snorts. "You could have your old room and everything," he says, and Jayce scoffs, letting mock disdain settle upon his lips.

"You'd really put me back in that terrible cell block of a room?" he teases, and Viktor shrugs, leaning forward.

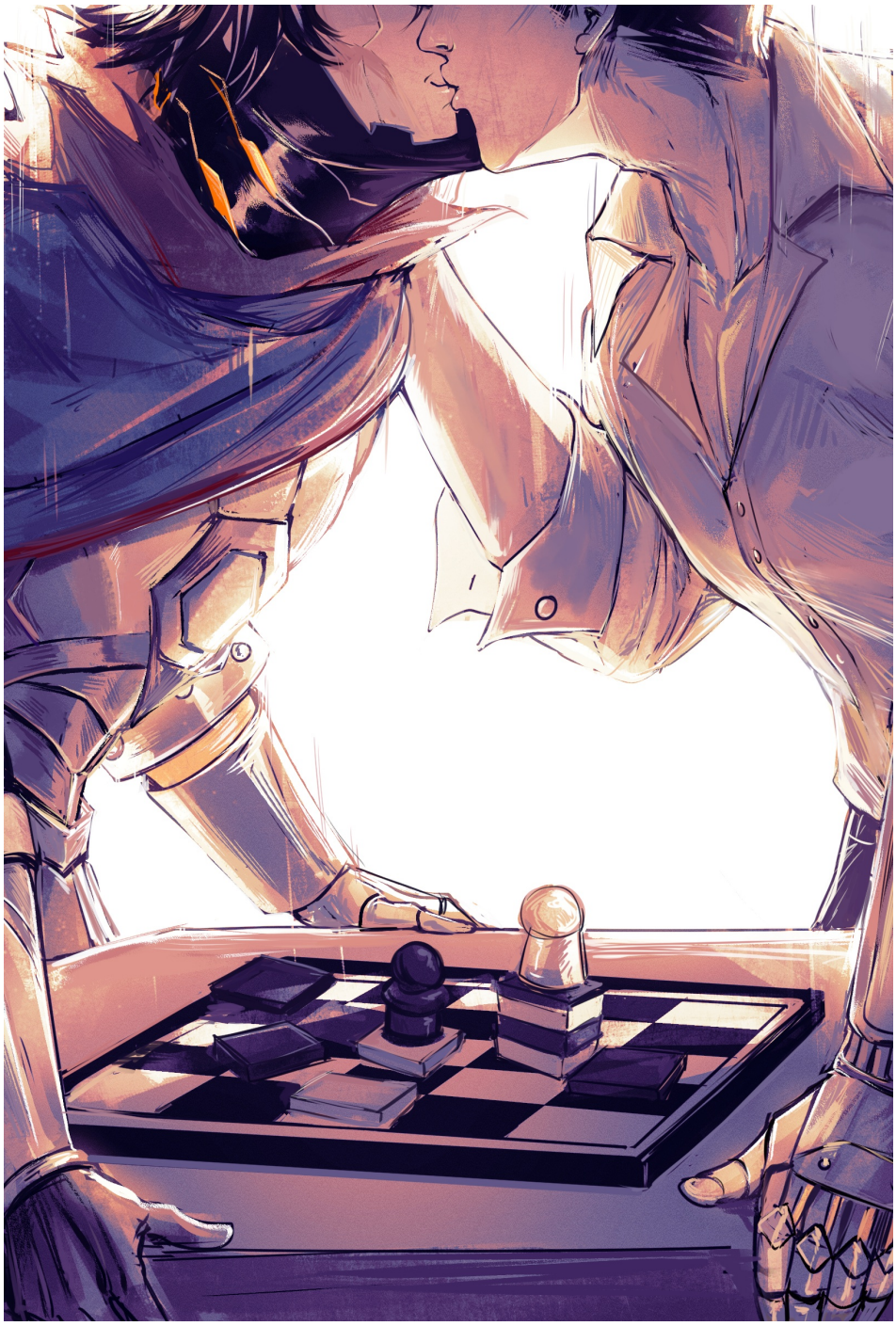
"I might," he admits, "but I suppose it depends on how nice of a room you give me at my new place, hm?"

Jayce feels a rush of *something* as a smile breaks out across his face, hands settling upon the table as he leans forward in his chair, head tilting as he stares back at Viktor.

"I have a lovely master bedroom," Jayce states, and Viktor shakes his head, hand resting soft atop Jayce's. Metal fingers and human ones press together and intertwine, slightly, as Viktor leans forward more.

"So do I," Viktor replies, smirking lightly. "Would you like a tour?"

And Jayce nods, meeting Viktor halfway as Viktor leans forward those final few inches to kiss him. Jayce brings his other hand up to cup at Viktor's face, fingers pressing soft against Viktor's cheek, and Viktor kisses him deeper, knocking stones off the game board and onto the floor as he presses himself forward into Jayce's lips.



Viktor pulls him up as they kiss, and together they make their way towards the staircase at the back of the room. Viktor continues to kiss him as they go, his hands moving to grip Jayce's hips, and Jayce laughs, his own hands tangling in the other man's hair.

Jayce curses as he stumbles up the stairs, Viktor's hands steadying him as he goes. "I hate all your fucking staircases—" he laughs, and Viktor smirks into their kiss, his laugh breathy against Jayce's lips as Jayce leans further into him.

"You'll get used to them soon enough," he says, once they finally make it up to the top, and Jayce huffs a laugh, the noise soft and fond as Viktor pulls him carefully towards his bedroom.

"I certainly hope so," he replies, grinning, and—sure enough—in the next couple of days, he does.

- -

And as the days progress, the two of them make plans.

They agree to remain in Zaun until Viktor hears word from the College, both to allow Jayce to recover in full, and to give him enough time to make arrangements for their return to Piltover. Jayce spends his days writing letters—both to the Academy and to his family—and Viktor conducts his own affairs around Zaun, setting up a re-routing system for his mail and generally preparing his lab for a period of absence.

Jayce knows that it will take time to fully shift their lives in the way that they plan to, yet Viktor seems just as cautiously eager as he, and they get through their days slowly, almost domestically, and Jayce wouldn't have it any other way.

On the morning of Jayce's initial departure, Viktor is quiet, contemplative as the two of them make breakfast together in the kitchen. Jayce kisses Viktor lightly as he brings their coffee to the table, and they eat together in relative silence while Jayce runs through his list of *TO-DOs*, written in the notebook that Viktor had given him so many weeks ago. He's nearing the last couple pages now, and it feels almost bittersweet.

"I think I'm set," Jayce murmurs, and he glances up to find Viktor looking at him, quietly, from his side of the table. "I'll take the elevator up this afternoon, make sure that affairs are in order, and then I'll come back to help you with your move early next week."

Viktor hums, the noise low and agreeable. "I'll be ready," he says, and Jayce smiles at him, soft and fond and satisfied.

Nearly two months of living with the other man, and Jayce finds that—despite the differences and disagreements that the two of them have inevitably fallen into—he might be happier now than he ever has been before. He feels like his life is finally falling into the place that it has always been destined to fall, and he can't help but attribute that feeling to Viktor.

The accident and Jayce's need for emergency prosthetics had been unfortunate—and Jayce won't deny that he wishes it hadn't happened the way it did—yet it had acted as a catalyst for him finally taking the time to understand Viktor, and it had facilitated conversations that would have otherwise been left unsaid.

Would Jayce have taken the time to try and understand Viktor, had he not been put in a situation where it was necessary? Would *Viktor* have?

Perhaps, Jayce thinks—but he supposes he'll never know for sure. It all comes back to accepting life for what it is, and not dwelling on the hypotheticals.

Could things have happened differently? Absolutely. But they didn't, and accepting that fact is something that Jayce finds less difficult for him now than it was before. There will surely be difficulties that they face moving forward, additional troubles that the two of them will be forced to work through, but Jayce will accept those moments as they come, and he'll learn to work through them in the same way that he's learned to work with Viktor, now.

Viktor has always played a large part in Jayce's life, for better or for worse. *And these days,* Jayce thinks, *the answer has been "for better" more often than not.* It's almost surreal, how quickly his life changed, but Jayce is appreciative of the fact that it had, and he's happy with where that change has brought him.

His life is falling back into place, and he likes where it's going.

"Thank you," Jayce finally says, quietly, and Viktor smiles back at him—the movement small and near imperceptible as he sips from his mug.

“For what?” he asks, and Jayce just shrugs, so many answers coming to mind that he’s not even sure it’s worth trying to state them.

“Everything, I suppose.”

And Viktor laughs lightly, stands up from his chair, moves over to where Jayce sits, and kisses him.

“You’re welcome,” he replies, evenly, and Jayce laughs too.

Chapter End Notes

And that's a wrap; thanks to everyone who has been reading + leaving comments each week, it's been a joy to read each one. This is my very first longfic (I don't think I'd written a single fic over 5k, before this lol), and I learned a whole lot throughout the process. My writing style has changed a bunch since I first started writing this fic, and I'm very proud of my growth overall! It has honestly been very exciting to see.

That said, I hope you all enjoyed *two halves*—please look forward to more content of these two in the future. You can find me @alainey_lee on twitter, as always!

And finally, much love again to @bekkomi for all the lovely art (and for supporting me throughout the making of this fic). It's been quite a ride, but it was lots of fun doing it with you!

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!